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OR,

The Covers and Blinds of Gotham.

BY JO PIERCE,

AUTHOR OF "SPICY JIM," "PAVEMENT PETE,"
"TARTAR TIM," "WRESTLING REX," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BLOW AND THE THREAT.

NEW YORK was in the rush and confusion of its daily business life when a man stood on Murray street looking at a vehicle which stood by the curbstone. It was a private outfit, and the carriage was trim and elaborate, the horses were handsome and full of life, and the uniformed driver on the box was true to the peculiar model of his class.

"'TAIN'T THE STYLE AT OIL GUTTER TER LET ONE MAN DO ALL THE BROOSIN'.
LOOK OUT FER ME! I'M COMIN'!"

The man who was regarding the equipage was neither trim nor prepossessing, and it needed only one look to see that he was not a New Yorker.

He wore clothes which did not fit his gaunt form any too well, and a soft, slouch hat, but the clothes were of good material, and a diamond glittered in the front of his shirt.

This man had evidently been wooing the liquids that bring profit to the city saloon and loss to the saloon's patrons, for his eyes were dull and heavy, and he blinked frequently in an attempt to keep his visual organs open.

Intoxicated he was not, but he was under the influence of drink to a certain degree.

While he was still looking, and, plainly, revolving some idea in his mind, a young lady descended the stairs which led to the second floor of the big business building near at hand. She was handsome and stylish, and any one might have been excused for looking at her with interest. The gaunt man did more: he awkwardly raised his hat and accosted her.

"Good-mornin', Miss Elliston!"

An expression of regret and uneasiness appeared on her face as she saw him.

"Good-morning, sir," she returned, coldly, and was going quickly to the carriage when he checked her.

"Don't you know me? I'm Vandevere Van Decker."

"I am aware of it, sir."

"Been out on business?"

Miss Elliston gave the persistent questioner a glance far from friendly.

"It is a pleasant day, sir," was the evasive response.

Quickly she entered the carriage, but Van Decker put one of his heavily-booted feet on the step.

"I'll ride up with ye!" he remarked.

"Sir?"

"I said I'd ride up with ye."

"I'm not going home."

"Never mind; a ride anywhere in sech company will suit me wal," and Mr. Van Decker grinned in a foolish way.

He was not yet inside the carriage, for Miss Elliston had sat down on the side next to him, and he was considering how he could engineer his big boots and long limbs past her skirts.

"Wouldn't it be well to wait until you are asked?" the young lady demanded indignantly.

"Ha! ha! Very good joke. You New Yorkers hev a kind o' humor that ain't never heard out in the oil regions. Say, jest hitch over an' let me in!"

"You can't ride, sir!"

"No? and why not?"

"Because I have not asked you. Do you know it is very ungentlemanly to try and force your company on any one in this way?"

"Eh? Darn it all! what do you mean? You pretend ter give p'int on behavior ter me? I'll hev you ter understand that we know as much about perlitens at Oil Gutter as any New Yorker does, an' you can't afford ter put on no airs, anyhow, over me! Not much! Let me in, now; you've got on yer high boss, an' I'm goin' ter ride, whether or no. Move over, an'—"

The liquor was working in Van Decker's head, and he was insisting on his points in a cracked voice and peevish manner, but at that moment a hand grasped his collar and he was jerked back from the carriage with force which made his neck snap audibly.

"You scoundrel!" exclaimed a deep voice; "how dare you insult my sister?"

The man from Oil Gutter looked into the indignant face of a handsome young fellow, and the shock of the first surprise paralyzed his utterance for a moment.

Robert Elliston motioned to the driver.

"Go on!" he directed, and, a moment later, the vehicle was moving toward Broadway with the lady as its sole occupant.

Thus far, much to the relief of young Elliston, no crowd had been collected by the trouble, and, though his tones were intense as he proceeded, they were purposely made low.

"This is an infamous piece of work, Van Decker!"

"Right! You yanked me by the collar as ef I was only a dog."

"Why were you so meanly engaged, then?"

"I was only goin' ter ride with Irene."

"Her name is Miss Elliston to you, sir. Well, she objected, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did that!"

"Were you not man enough to heed the objection?"

"Now, you see here, Bob Elliston; you nor she can't afford ter put on no airs over me. You dassent—"

"I dare defend my sister from a scoundrel, at whatever cost!" was the quick retort.

"Oh! you dare? Scoundrel, be I? Blast you! take that!"

Vandevere Van Decker reached out quickly and caught Robert's nose between his thumb and finger. He did this with an insolent grin, and his manner was peevish rather than angry.

"I'll learn you New Yorkers—"

So said Mr. Van Decker, and then he went sprawling on his back, upset by a blow from Elliston's hand. In point of fact the latter was not indifferent to Van Decker's assertion that he "dared" not be severe with him, but the unpleasant position into which Miss Elliston had been driven, and the attack on his own nose, was too much for endurance. Nevertheless, the blow was only a light one on Van Decker's chest, but it was enough to push him backward, and his heel had caught against some obstruction and sent him down.

Elliston was immediately startled at his own temerity, and he took a hasty step forward and gave the man from Oil Gutter a hand to help him up.

"Boss, you're sp'ilin' the pictur'," cried a new voice, "an' it's against all the rules o' the prize-ring ter help him up. First knock-down for you. Go in an' settle it up loike you was out fer a purse. See?"

Robert paid no attention to these words, or the speaker. If he had turned he would have seen two persons who had just come out of Greenwich street—persons who furnished a sharp contrast to his own elegant, but modest attire.

They were a boy and a girl who seemed to be representatives of a class who never dine at Delmonico's, or ride behind spirited horses in Central Park.

Plain, coarse and without pretense to fashion was their attire, and their faces, though bright and alert, were not scrupulously clean. Their hair, too, needed attention, while their independent, nonchalant air bespoke them as much used to the streets as any other niche in life.

The boy appeared to be seventeen years old; the girl was about two years younger.

Vandevere Van Decker came up unsteadily.

"I trust you are not injured?" added Robert, uneasily.

"Did yer ever, Molly?" cried the boy.

"Where's the rules o' the prize-ring? Do they order a pugilist ter ask his antygonist ef he's hurted?"

"That was a mean trick o' yourn," declared Van Decker, trembling with anger.

"Remember the provocation."

"What I remember is the blow."

"Niver moind!" urged the boy. "Go in fer the second round. Time!"

"Be quiet, Denny!" urged the girl.

"Quiet, whin there's a chance for fun? Shame on you, Molly McGinnis! Give me a lift, will yez? Say: 'Sic 'em, Tige!' an' start the fun along."

"You have only yourself to thank," continued Elliston.

"Right," Van Decker agreed. "I owe you no thanks."

"You cannot expect me to endure everything."

"I expect you ter give me satisfaction. No man strikes me without gettin' his money back, with interest! Tain't the style at Oil Gutter ter let one man do all the broosin'. Look out fer me! I'm comin'!"

"Hooray!" shouted Dennis.

Van Decker put up his hands, though not in a way that gave promise of scientific work, and trouble seemed inevitable, but at that moment the proprietor of the store before which they stood, hustled out, followed by a clerk. Unlike most New Yorkers this merchant had no desire to see a display of pugilism, and he promptly collared the belligerent in the present case.

"What do you mean, sir?" he demanded. "How dare you fight in front of my store? Stop it, or I'll have you arrested!"

Van Decker swung his fist wildly.

"Leave go!" he cried. "Lemme alone, or I'll floor you fer a starter, you old fossil!"

"Fossil! You're the worst of the lot, and ought to be ashamed to fight at your age. You're drunk, too!"

"Drunk? Never, sir, never! I'm a teetotalator!"

"Keep your hands down. Don't strike me!"

"I'll strike whoever I please!" shouted Van Decker. "I come from Oil Gutter, Penn, where they raise men. Wasp-waisted dudes ain't indegenous ter that soil; not by a long shot!"

The speaker was making efforts to hit the

peacemakers, but without success. They held his hands, but he would not be quiet. He still thirsted for a fight, and found an abettor in the boy named Dennis. This denizen of the streets had a mischievous twinkle in his bright eyes and he put in side-remarks, whenever he had a chance, in these words:

"Two ter wan ain't fair fightin', at all, but I'll bet on Soft Hat. He's the boy for my money. Look at the muscle of him! Why, John L. wouldn't hev no show wid him! Bet yer he kin do them both up. Oh! they can't scare him! He's goin' ter get away wid the both of them. An' he kin do it easy, too!"

Which remarks had due effect on Van Decker, who had unbounded vanity, and, spurred on by the strong drink in his stomach, likewise, he was determined to whip the meddlers in the most approved Oil Gutter style.

He had lost sight of Robert Ellison, and not strangely; the latter had seized the chance to leave the neighborhood, and was out of sight.

"Boy," directed the merchant, turning to Dennis, "go for an officer!"

"Major-gineral or corporal?" inquired Dennis, gravely.

"You young duffer! I'll show you which, later!"

"Duffer? That's me; you've hit it right. Dennis Duff is m' name, sometimes called the Little Duffer. Office hours from eight A. M. to two o'clock next week. Business attended to wid dispatch an unfaithfulness."

A hand fell upon Dennis's arm, and he looked around to see a tall, rather handsome man beside him who was clothed in brown from head to foot.

"Hello, sport!" the gamin promptly saluted.

"Dennis," the new-comer hurriedly whispered, "we must get that man away!"

"Who? Soft Hat?"

"Yes. He's a friend of mine."

"More's the pity!"

"The fool is drunk, and that will get him into trouble. His wits work slowly. He mustn't be arrested, though; it never would do. I will engage this merchant in talk, and do you steer Van Decker off and save him from the coppers. See?"

CHAPTER II.

THE BROWN SPORT AND HIS KID.

DENNIS DUFF was not the person to need much explanation, and he quickly answered:

"I see. Heave ahead, boss!"

The man in brown turned to the merchant with a very bland manner.

"My dear sir, I beg your pardon for interfering here, but this man is a friend of mine. Unfortunately, he has taken a drop too much—"

"No man has a right to make a fool of himself, and that is what a drunkard does."

"You are right, sir; whisky is the curse of those who drink the vile stuff. In explanation of my friend's wretched condition, just now, let me say he is from the country, and has yielded to the fascination of city life. I beg that you will overlook his offense, and allow him to go to his boarding-house. He will suffer both mentally and physically when the effects of the liquor vanish."

"But I've sent for a policeman already."

"Pray don't press the charge, sir."

"I can't unless an officer comes."

"There he is, now," added the clerk.

A blue-coat was seen approaching with quick steps. A wonderful amount of dignity encompasses a street guardian of the peace, and he realizes it. This man came up promptly. He saw the crowd, but no disturbance.

"Phat does all dis m'ane?" he asked. "Oi was towld there was a riot, but where be the rioters?"

"The peace has been disturbed," explained the merchant, "and I want you to arrest this man."

He turned toward the disturber of the peace, as he thought, but failed to see either him or the man in brown.

"Why, where is he?" the speaker added.

A laugh rose from the crowd.

"Catch your hare before you cook it!" one man advised, and a second added:

"You've lost your prey, sir. While the man in brown engaged your attention a boy escorted the other man away, and while you looked at this officer, the man in brown made tracks, himself. He is probably over by the ferry now, going so fast you could play a game of checkers on his coat-tails."

The merchant showed chagrin for a moment, but accepted the situation all the more readily because he had an idea that he had been hasty. He laughed, and let the matter drop.

In the meanwhile the man in brown had walked briskly to Greenwich street, and then north until he found Dennis and Van Decker on a corner. The latter looked sheepish and uneasy.

"Well, this is fine business for you!" exclaimed his adult friend.

"I—I couldn't help it."

"If we hadn't run you out, the cop would have run you in."

"I know it, an' I'm sorry."

"You never got this way before."

"That's a fact, but I took a little spirit fer a toothache, an' it flew ter my head."

"Hev that tooth yanked out!" gravely advised Dennis.

"Whisky is a demon that should be let alone."

"Listen ter the Brown Sport!" Dennis added.

"The Duffer and I never imbibe," pursued the man in brown, "and you see the result. Clear heads and full pockets. The drunkard has only a thirst and a pain up in his cranial depot, which would be a head if he gave it a chance. But I won't reproach you, Van, for the best of men make slips now and then. Suppose I see you home, for I want to talk with you. Dennis, I may call to see you, soon."

"All right, boss."

"This kid," the Brown Sport added, "is my right hand man. He's young, but there's coal enough stowed in his bin to keep a fire the year around. If I ever send him to you, trust him fully. Eh, Dennis?"

"Right you be, boss! Me an' you work in pairs."

"Here's half a dollar. Buy something for yourself. Come on, Van Decker!"

The man from Oil Gutter had now so sobered off that he exhibited but slight signs of his potations and walked without a lurch beside his companion, but, no sooner than they were out of Dennis's hearing, the Brown Sport exclaimed:

"You fool! what have you been doing?"

"Don't say a word," Van Decker humbly requested.

"I shall say a good many words. You have insulted Irene Elliston and been knocked down by her brother."

"Curse him!"

"Curse yourself, rather. Why did you commit this folly?"

"The infernal whisky was in my head, Montague. But, I didn't say nothin' rude ter the gal; I only tried ter git a ride in her carriage—a fool game, I admit, but it might 'a' been worse."

"You have shown the Ellistons just what you are."

"I ain't showed them what I can be."

"Don't bully, even here. Roland Montague and Vandevere Van Decker must be respectable in their eyes, or our game never will work. Thank fortune, I was not mixed up in your break."

"Anyhow, they've got ter do the right thing."

"Leave that to me. You are too aggressive. How many times must I tell you that soft and easy is our watchword? I'll bend the Ellistons, or break them, but it wants heads, not hands, to do it. If you will be sensible we will win, yet."

While the men were retreating, Dennis Duff was having a conversation on the corner. They were barely gone when Molly McGinnis made her reappearance.

"Denny!" she spoke rather sharply.

"Hi! Molly; you there?"

"I've been watchin'."

"Good!"

"I ain't seen no good."

"No?"

"You took money from the Brown Sport. I wouldn't be after doin' that, meself."

"Why, he's my boss."

"I know he is, an' that's jest what worries me. I don't like him, Denny."

Molly made the assertion with emphasis, but Dennis opened his eyes in surprise.

"He's a sport, sure, but every wan says he's the squarest man in the business."

"I don't like him!"

"He plays the races," pursued Dennis, warming to his subject, "but he does it above-board. He hates a 'tout,' and won't take pay for tips, though w'ot he don't know about hosses ain't no good, sure. He goes ter the t'eyter, but when it's over, he goes home an' ter bed. He's a politician, but says it's a shame ter barter votes. Now, then, what could you's ask fer a squarer man than the Brown Sport? Ef my word don't go, ask anny wan. Everybody knows him, 'cause he dresses in brown all the toime, an' men who niver heerd his reel name o' Roland Montague kin tell ye of the Brown Sport."

"You've been after doin' odd jobs fer him, fer at least two years. Didn't you's never catch him in anny crooked work?"

"Niver!"

"They call you the Brown Sport's Kid," remarked Molly, "an' you's stand up fer him as loyally as you do fer all yer friends. Maybe it's all roight, but I don't like the man. I'm afraid you's'll get into some trouble along o' him, Denny."

"Your judgment ain't good," returned Dennis, a twinkle suddenly appearing in his eyes.

"Sure, yours niver fails!" she retorted.

"That's right, Molly."

"An' all because you're a traveled man! Didn't yer father come all the way from Ballyragget, Kilkenny county, in the steerage?"

"Ah! me jewel," retorted Dennis, chucking Molly under the chin, "but he didn't work his passage."

"Who did?"

"Sure, I don't know, but I'm after rememberin' that Mr. Patrick McGinnis told me once the r'ason he growed a beard whin he landed was because he had no money ter pay fer a shave."

"He could have got shaved ef he'd made a trade with thim I know."

"Who?"

"I'm callin' no names, but Mr. Michael Duff towld me once he'd got enough city mud on his clothes whin layin' pavements ter make a farm, an' niver paid no tax on it."

Dennis laughed good-humoredly.

"It's tax enough on Mr. Duff and Mr. McGinnis ter hev kids like us."

"Sure, an' we can't twit each other, fer ain't we cousins?"

"Your father an' mine both say so, but your gran'-father wa'n't mine. They were cousins, too, an' it's twistin' relationship inter a corkscrew ter say the same of us. But then, wasn't your father an' mine both born in Ballyragget? Sure, Kilkenny air keeps the heart o' man fresh, fer our elders say so."

"New York air must affect the heart, too," asserted Molly, with a pout.

"Why?"

"'Cause I seen you wink at Maggie Meehan, Friday week."

"An' what of it? Friday's an unlucky day, an' a wink give then always means nothin'."

"You're a flirt; that's what you be; but I'll forgive you 'cause you're me cousin. But won't you go over an' see me mother, now? Ste was after tellin' me this mornin' that she wanted to inquire how Mrs. Duff's rheumatism was doin'."

There was much good will between the Duff and the McGinnis families, and Dennis and Molly shared in that good will. They had been reared in the very part of the city where they then were, and Greenwich street—the street where merchants keep the bulk of their goods on the sidewalk—was as familiar to them as Fifth avenue was to the children of the wealthy.

But Dennis and Molly liked Greenwich street. It was home, and they and their surroundings fitted as if made expressly one for the other.

CHAPTER III.

THE BROWN SPORT'S DIPLOMACY.

THE Elliston residence was on Madison avenue, and was one of the many that stood in the fashionable part of that city thoroughfare.

Colonel Carlisle Elliston was the nominal head of the family, but age lay heavily upon him, and he had retired from all active business. He was weak physically, and far from being in his old mental strength, but was passing the last years of his honored and honorable life in dignified and happy rest.

He was a proud man, and his pride was of a kind strictly of the world. Rich and poor, friends, business associates and servants had alike always found him one of the kindest and most considerate of men, but under the surface lay the feeling that he, his ancestors and his children, were equal to the best, and far superior to the mass of men, rich or poor.

After he left the army, in 1865, he had established a banking business in Wall street, in partnership with Mr. Andrew Iber. They had prospered; their reputation for good judgment, solidity and honor was high; and around the house of Elliston & Iber the colonel's affections hung as firmly as ever man's did to anything.

Mr. Iber was still able to be at the office every day but he was old, and the management devolved upon Robert Elliston and a force of salaried men.

Robert, thus trusted with the sole conduct of a great business, was twenty-six years old. He was thoroughly able, and, really, had been the manager from the day he was twenty-one. The colonel and his partner were both at the office,

then, and supposed to look to everything personally, but Robert was the only one who knew the entire business, day by day.

It had been so ever since. Young as he was he had since had unlimited authority, and, with the singular lack of care not uncommon in business circles, was not required to give any account of his "stewardship."

Clerks in the office had expressed wonder before then, one to the other, why such a shrewd manager as Robert did not overhaul all the books and learn just where, and how, Elliston and Iber stood. The old partners never had done this, but Robert ought to be up to modern ways, and aware of the lessons taught by modern failure and embarrassments, not to speak of defalcations.

Later in that same day when the previously-recorded scenes occurred, a cab rolled up Madison avenue and, finally, paused in front of the Elliston residence. A man dismounted, and, going to the door, rung the bell. He was clothed elegantly, but in a color far from common.

Every visible garment was of brown.

A servant, black and uniformed, opened the door promptly, and the caller inquired:

"Is Mr. Robert Elliston in?"

"I will see, sir," replied the discreet servitor.

"Very well."

The caller presented his card, which was duly carried to young Elliston. He read the name, "Roland Montague," and a shadow passed over his face. He hesitated for a moment and then directed:

"Conduct him here!"

The servant retreated.

"Trouble ahead!" murmured Robert, gloomily. "Van Decker resents the blow I gave him, and Montague will use it to harass me further. Would to Heaven I were free to meet him as I wish; I would welcome poverty rather than this persecution, but it would kill my father. I must temporize further."

The Brown Sport came in quietly. He was a sleek and aristocratic person, and though well aware that he had Elliston in a hopeless predicament, did not show any airy or insolent sense of power.

He bowed blandly.

"I trust I don't intrude?" he questioned.

"Be seated, Mr. Montague," was the evasive reply, which Elliston felt obliged to make polite.

"Thanks!"

Montague sat down, and gently brushed his smooth face.

"I was afraid I should not find you at home."

"I came back early."

"And Miss Elliston? I trust she did not experience any ill-effects from that unfortunate affair?"

"How could it be otherwise?"

"I am deeply annoyed. There is no real excuse for Van Decker, but you see he is in from the country, and he yielded to the power of the villainous saloons and drank too much. That is the story in brief. He is now sober, repentant and ashamed, and has requested me to come here and apologize for him."

Robert could not answer as he wished. He made a virtue of necessity, and returned:

"I hope the future will prove him sincere."

"So do I. It is painful to be mixed up with such a man."

"I am well aware of it!" Elliston exclaimed, impulsively.

"You refer to the Eldorado Oil Company?"

"Yes."

"I hope that matter can be straightened out."

"Van Decker will not allow it."

"He is a miser!" the Brown Sport declared, warmly. "It is absurd to try and get more money out of you. The work is unworthy of him."

"Is it not in keeping with his character? His demand is blackmail, pure and simple. If he were not a scoundrel, he would not make the demand. Game and man are off from the same piece."

"I wonder you ever invested, Elliston."

"Have I not explained before? It was the folly of youth; it was a fatal mistake; it was criminal! Simply because I knew the business well, my poor father and Mr. Iber thought I was worthy of being trusted with the business of the house of Elliston & Iber. They had speculated wisely, cautiously, moderately. I was a boy of twenty-one, trusted unreservedly. Fatal error! Fatal, criminal folly on my part!"

"My dear sir, you wrong yourself!"

Unheeding the Brown Sport's bland interruption, Robert went on with suppressed vehemence:

"Eager to emulate and excel the record of my elders, in the money-making line, I withdrew funds from the business and invested in the Eldorado Oil Company, of Oil Gutter, Pennsylvania. Enticing name! Why did not 'Oil Gutter' warn me? All my money has gone into that 'gutter!'"

"Others lost—"

"Their own money, let us hope; I squandered what was not mine—*stole*, if you will, to sink in wild speculation. The oil scheme was a failure; the Eldorado never has paid a dividend; and the money invested is sunk. My stock is not worth five cents on the dollar—no; not one cent, perhaps."

"Losses will occur to the best—"

"I could lose my own money, and charge the loss up to experience, but to wreck the house of Elliston & Iber! Great heavens! think of it! My father—"

Robert stopped short. The Brown Sport knew all the particulars of the unfortunate speculation, so frank speech on such facts could do no harm, but to dilate on the fact that financial ruin would overwhelm proud, infirm Colonel Elliston would be to sharpen the weapons of one who was already suspected of being a secret enemy.

But the Brown Sport was not dull-witted.

"I know," he agreed, feelingly, "it would be a terrible blow to your poor old father. He loves the business house he built up; he loves the family honor; he likes the position in society which his family occupies."

Robert drew a quick, deep breath, but was silent.

"Vandevere Van Decker has all of the grasping nature of a miser," pursued Roland Montague, carefully choosing his words. "He sees how you are placed, and has come to you with an offer to give or take. What he is willing to give is a sum so small that it would not help you any, and you are anxious to hold on to the stock in the oil concern, in the hope of getting your money back by some new discovery, there."

"That no longer influences me; the repeated tests have convinced me that the land at Oil Gutter is of no value. I've been there myself. But a condition of Van Decker's offer to buy my share for a pittance, is that he may boom the Eldorado on the New York market, using my name. In fact, he threatens to boom it, anyhow, and use my name, unless I buy him out."

"Which you can't do."

Elliston moved uneasily, but made no reply.

"I understand," added Montague, feelingly.

"The money you took out of the banking-house of Elliston & Iber, five years ago—covering up the withdrawal by means of a little bookkeeping of your own, more ingenious than honest—has been a millstone upon your neck. You were supposed to have certain resources. You did not have them; you had dropped them in Oil Gutter. And at every turn, for years, the dissipated funds have harassed you. As a snake coils and turns here and there, in and out, so the shadow of the scattered money has embarrassed you. To-day, the house of Elliston & Iber, supposedly strong, is insolvent!"

The words were strong, but the Brown Sport spoke them with skill.

An uninformed listener would have said he felt deeply for his companion.

Robert was not deceived.

"Not so bad as that, I hope," he replied, his face flushing.

"Embarrassed, then."

"That state of affairs may come."

"And Elliston & Iber go under?"

"Don't speak of it!" exclaimed the young banker.

"But, suppose I speak practically, with a view to helping you out of your predicament?"

Robert regarded Montague doubtfully.

"You?"

"Yes. Suppose I use my skill upon Van Decker, and so move him, by argument, plea, threat or device—whatever plan I can think of—if I save you from financial ruin, what will be my reward?"

For the first time Montague betrayed eagerness as he awaited the reply.

CHAPTER IV.

OTHERS ARE INTERESTED IN OIL.

ROBERT ELLISTON studied the Brown Sport's face closely. He had become acquainted with the man since he met Vandevere Van Decker, and knew little of him personally. He was aware that, among sporting-men, Montague had a high reputation for "square" dealing, but he lacked faith himself.

"How do you expect to change Van Decker's purpose?" he asked, after a pause.

"As I said, by argument, plea, threat, or device. I know not how, at present."

"Van Decker is after cash."

"If necessary, he shall have that."

"From whom?"

"From me. I might loan you enough to buy off his claim."

The words were quietly, but modestly spoken. They surprised Elliston. He had a vague idea that a sporting-man who managed a big enterprise usually made some money, but that the one who only played the races, and kindred lines, and spent his time about town, generally lived from hand to mouth. He had not looked upon the Brown Sport as a capitalist.

"Two thoughts occur to me," he finally responded.

"Name them," Montague requested.

"First of all, if anybody pays Van Decker, he pays for a claim of no value. The Eldorado oil plant is not worth as much as a common Pennsylvania farm. In brief, if Van Decker gets the money, it will not be that I buy out his share in the oil plant, but simply blackmail exacted by him whereby he agrees not to boom Eldorado stock in New York, or elsewhere, with my name attached."

"That is about the size of it."

"Next, suppose the money is raised, I only change masters, as it were, and plunge deeper into debt. I buy what is, and always will be, worthless, and add to my liabilities just what sum I borrow. I get nothing into the business of Elliston & Iber; I do not replace the dissipated reserve fund of that firm; I do nothing to put that firm on its feet."

"But you silence Van Decker."

"By submitting to blackmail."

"Yet, you save your own and your father's honor."

Robert was silent.

"Don't let me over-persuade you," continued Montague, "but I am here as a friend. The Eldorado stock must not be boomed!"

"That man is a villain!" Robert cried.

"He is the chief owner of the Eldorado."

"The majority of the stock is his, I admit."

"He is a vulgar fellow who is bound up in the greed of gold. Let us buy his wretched soul and get rid of him."

"And how," thought the young banker, "would I then get rid of you?"

But he prudently answered:

"If I had the money I would buy, but 'ifs' rarely make the groundwork of a bargain."

"Let me arrange all that?"

"Where does your reward come in?"

"It is enough to me if I can help an honorable man of business."

The reply was ready, and had an air of sincerity, but Elliston was not satisfied. He did not trust the Brown Sport, and doubted if relief was to be found by following his advice. That a sting lurked somewhere he did not doubt, and he was well aware that the cunning of a city sharper made him the worst of all enemies.

Better by far was it to have the lank Pennsylvanian for an opponent than Montague.

But, were they not already in league?

Robert was wise enough to suspect that they were, and he decided to gain time—though he saw no great good to be gained from delay.

Nevertheless, he thanked the Brown Sport, and asked for a few days to think the matter over. The latter referred to Van Decker's obstinate nature, and said he doubted if he could keep the fellow in check for more than a day or two. At his suggestion the time of the next interview was set for the evening of the following day.

Then Mr. Montague took his departure.

He marched down Madison avenue in a very satisfied frame of mind, but saw little by the way; he was thinking too busily.

"The match has been applied to the already lighted train," he soliloquized, "and if an explosion don't follow it will be because my foot is set on the flame before it touches the powder. Elliston must bend or break. I have not brought Van Decker here for child's play. I want a share of the Elliston boodle, and all of pretty Irene. Unless she becomes Mrs. Montague, the old colonel will get a biff between the eyes, as it were."

Finally recovering from his deep meditation the schemer deviated from his course, walked to Sixth avenue, took the Elevated Road and returned to the lodgings he had secured for Van Decker.

He found that person shaking dice for amusement.

"It's a great game," he declared, "an' I'd like

ter be a sport, myself. Ef I could git the drinks on ter somebody else, as you do in the saloons, I could afford ter 'ile my j'int, now an' then."

"You want to forget the drinks," the Brown Sport answered, sharply. "We have too much at stake, and your head is too weak, for nonsense. Have you been drinking any more?"

"Wal, I took one swaller," Van Decker admitted, "in the saloon."

"So you've been there, you fool!"

"Say, don't be hard on a feller; I was as dry as a fish. I made a nice acquaintance, too: a stylish chap that would 'a' set them up fer me all I wanted, but I wouldn't drink but once. He was from old Penn., too. Lives at Oil City."

"Did you introduce the subject of oil?"

"No; he did."

"And did you say you were interested that way?"

"Ye-es."

"Then you've been trapped!"

"Eh? You don't think he was a detective?" Van Decker cried, in alarm.

"Hardly that, but some meddler fell afoul of you. Meetings like that occur only by design. The man may have been a bunco man who learned who you were, and sought to swindle you, or some sharper who wanted a share of your plunder by methods little less honest. I suppose you let him pump you freely? Didn't you talk oil?"

"Ye-es."

"What did you say? Out with it!"

Montague was angry and peremptory, and Van Decker was alarmed, so it was no easy matter to get particulars. Finally, the man from Oil Gutter admitted he had told of the Eldorado, and boasted of its richness as an oil plant, but he stoutly denied having said anything that could endanger their scheme.

"Did he want to buy?" Montague asked.

"He said he would see me ag'in about it."

"Where?"

"He didn't say; here, I s'pose. He give me his keerd, an' said we 'ile men ought ter stand in with each other."

"Let me see the card."

It was given to the sport, and he studied it carefully. It had the name of an alleged oil company printed on it; the location of the fields was given, as was the name of the New York agent and his office.

"He said that was him," Van Decker explained.

"Probably the man never was in the office in his life. He is a swindler. He is not the man whose name is on this card, and he has buncoed you, or intends to."

"Sizzlin' pancakes! how d'ye know?"

"The ways of bunco men are not strange to the citizens of New York, if they are to you."

"I b'lieve he was all right, an' I'm goin' ter that office ter see!"

The rural gentleman was growing indignant, and he started up with emphatic movements. The Brown Sport did not seek to check him. To that crafty person, himself, it seemed to be the best way to settle the matter. If the stranger was what he had claimed, it would be a great relief to know it, while if he was a spy, the sooner the fact was established the better.

If they were under suspicion, all of Montague's shrewdness was needed to avert danger.

Both went out and walked toward the address given, and the leader formed a suitable excuse for the call as they went. The address proved to be a substantial building, and the name was found on the marble slab at the door. This proved nothing, and they went on to the office.

The first look inside was enough to satisfy Van Decker, and he nudged the Brown Sport, and whispered:

"That's him!"

A gentleman was bending over his desk and engaged in writing. As they advanced he looked up, smiled when he saw the Pennsylvanian, and observed:

"I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Van Decker made his excuse for the call and introduced his companion as "Mr. Shaw." Both wished themselves away, but they were in for the interview, and had to endure it as gracefully as possible. The stranger talked business from the start, partly in the way of oil, but brought in politics, stocks, and other things dear to the heart of man.

The call was not prolonged, and when the schemers were again on the street, the Brown Sport remarked:

"The joke is on me; that man is all right. I was too suspicious."

He might have returned to his original opinion if he could have looked into the office again. When they were fairly away, a man, who had

not been seen by them, emerged from a closet which had been barely large enough to shelter him. The office-tenant laughed:

"So you're not smothered?"

"Almost."

"Then you've had a double escape."

"The first was narrow, anyhow. If I had not chanced to look out into the hall just as that lank countryman was advancing, I should have been caught here."

"But would he have been the wiser?"

"His running-mate would."

"Shaw?"

"Shaw, nothing! His name is Roland Montague, and if I am not away off, he is a rascal. He is called the Brown Sport, and is a big gun at the races, and a man about town. Square as a die, most people say, and the police have no charge against him, but the doubts I always have felt grow big. I have wondered how one so green as Van Decker would play any game on New Yorkers, but it's a different matter if the Brown Sport trots with him in double-harness."

"You feel sure of your grip?"

"Yes; but I shall ask no more of you, Dave. Montague is suspicious. Their visit to you was but a blind; as soon as Montague heard I had been pumping Van, through you, he tumbled in a degree, as I should have known he would, had I known he was in the game."

"See what it is to be Tom Tracer, Headquarters detective!" exclaimed Dave, smiling.

"Tom Tracer has work to do before he will be onto this game," replied the man who had come from the closet. "The scheme is a deep one, or Montague would not be in it. Thank fortune! he did not see me here."

"What will you do, if I am out of it?"

The detective meditated; then replied thoughtfully:

"There is a boy over on Greenwich street who is known as the Brown Sport's Kid, because he does errands for that person. I am going to see that boy. I think he and I can be useful to each other."

CHAPTER V.

THE BAIT AND THE HOOK.

"APPLES! Fresh-laid apple-es! Oranges! North-pole orange-es! Ancient fruit of all kinds!"

The speaker was Dennis Duff, and his voice was pitched in a cracked treble as he stole up behind a girl who carried a basket on her arm. In the basket was a variety in the way of fruit. The girl was Molly McGinnis. She and the basket were old companions; she had sold fruit in the lower part of the city for years, finding customers among business men.

She turned quickly as she heard the youth's mischievous words.

"Ah! be off wid you, Denny!" she retorted. "You're loike a hen that cackles when she ain't laid no egg."

"I know some bad eggs," Dennis suggested.

"There is such, an' I pity your mother for it, whin she's taken so much pains with her son."

"Mrs. McGinnis says sons are easy ter raise, but girls are no good."

"Strange you hang around thim, so much."

"Sure, an' I'm a missionary, an' I know who needs reformin'."

"Yes, an' you know it's easier ter repent fer others than fer yerself."

"I know them as needs it the most. But le's stop fightin', Molly; here comes a biped who's as full as a royal duke, an' you may be able ter sell some dilapidated fruit. Port yer helm, boss, or you may run inter a lamp-post an' take a wheel off yer carriage."

A man was advancing toward them, and he did seem to be under the influence of strong drink or some other kind of spirits, for his manner was hilarious. He had his hat off, and was making absurd gestures as he walked. Nevertheless, he was not so intoxicated as Dennis had indicated, for he walked straight enough.

It was evening of the day last referred to, and Dennis and Molly had been alone on the street, as far as could be seen, until the wanderer made his appearance.

"Hi! Molly," the Duffer suddenly added, "that jim-jam student ain't no stranger. It's Van What's-his-name Van Decker."

"So it is, sure."

"Sell him a Havaneer apple, or Greenland apple. Go in, Miss McGinnis; make money while the gas shines."

The man from Oil Gutter was accosted promptly.

"Apples, sir?" inquired the girl. "Apples

an' oranges? All kinds o' fresh fruit! Buy some, sir?"

Van Decker squared himself away and took a good look at the speaker.

"Wal, now, what's this? Peddlin' the stuff in a basket the size of a thimble, be you? Why, I've taken a two-hoss load down ter old Steve Martin's store, afore now, an' never yelled like that over them, nuther."

"Won't you buy, sir?"

"Is it reg'lar city style ter do it?"

"All the fast young men buy," insinuated Dennis, pinching Molly's arm slyly.

"They do? Then, by mighty! give me a bushel—no; you ain't got a peck. Never mind; here's a dollar—take it an' be happy. Darn the fruit! I don't want it. Fact is," added Mr. Van Decker, confidentially, "I am out ter hev a good time, an' I'll do it ef I bu'st my gallus-buttons all off. I'll paint the town yarler."

"Red, you mean."

"Is that it? Wal, red, then. Anyhow, I'm out fer a bender, an' don't you forget it. Whoop!"

The Pennsylvanian flourished his hat in mid-air, and shuffled his heavy boots about in a clumsy attempt at dancing.

"See here, colonel," observed Dennis, "ef you whoop things up in that style, you'll get pulled in."

"Pulled in where?"

"Arrested."

"Thunder! An' I've only jest begun my spree. I won't yell ag'in."

"Wot would the Brown Sport say, ter see ye now?"

"Bub, if you hev any benevolence in yer system, don't let Roland G. Montague know on this! He would lick me like sin; I do b'lieve he would. Keep it dark sonny, fer I must see life, an' he ain't willin'. Here's a dollar. Take it, an' don't let on ter Montague!"

Dennis calmly pocketed the bribe.

"You'd better go home, now," he advised.

"Not much."

"But you'll fall afoul o' thieves."

"Say, do you s'pose there is a chap in New York who could get the best o' me?"

"Only about a million on 'em."

"A million who could fool me?"

"Yes."

"Bub, ef you was a man I'd lick you fer that, but I only pity yer ignorance; you don't know Van Van Decker. Hullo! somebody else is a-comin'."

Molly had gone her way with her basket, bound for the western terminus of the East River Bridge, and only the countryman and Dennis saw the approach of two men who came from the direction of Broadway. They were cheap-looking persons, who tried to make considerable show at small expense, but had a rakish air which spoke distinctly to Dennis.

"Lucky I'm with this gent, or he might get buncoed," the Duffer thought.

The strangers looked hard at Van Decker, and then one of them suddenly advanced and held out his hand.

"Why, how are you, Mr. Van Decker?" he exclaimed.

"How-de-do! How-de-do!" returned the Pennsylvanian, shaking the other's hand warmly. "I don't know ye, but I'm glad ter see ye, by gosh!"

"You are the Brown Sport's friend."

"Right you be!"

"So are we."

"Good! I knew I ought ter be glad ter see ye."

"We met you and Montague in a saloon, but there was a crowd, and I dare say you don't remember us. My name is Garland. My friend is Jake Dowling. Where is the Brown Sport?"

"Dunno where he is."

"I'm sorry, for we could give him a sight well worth seeing: something only five men in New York have seen up to date. The whole city will be wild over it in a week, and Montague would appreciate the honor of being among the first. There is nothing a New Yorker likes more than to get ahead of his million-and-a-half of neighbors."

"There's a bait!" thought Dennis.

"You don't say!" exclaimed Van Decker.

"What is it?"

"Mermaids!"

"Eh?"

"Seven mermaids have been captured in the South Sea, among the rocks of Tataolboy Island, near Weweropem Point. We have arranged a big tank where they can disport themselves, and there they stay, combing their hair, admiring themselves in looking-glasses, and singing siren songs."

The agent from Oil Gutter always had supposed that mermaids were myths, but was ashamed to confess it.

"Wal, now, that's clever," he asserted; "what does it cost ter see this show?"

"No price will be charged until the doors are regularly opened to the public. Just now, only a few of the men about town are admitted. That's why I wanted the Brown Sport."

"Say, let me in as his deputy, will ye?"

"We-el, I don't know about that."

"Why not?"

"We were to let in only 'the boys.'"

"I'm one on 'em. I'm from Oil Gutter, the smartest town in Pennsylvany. Yes, sir; an' I know a reason why that town is goin' ter hev a boom. You bet! You see, I'm a strong personal friend o' the Brown Sport, too, an' one o' the boys. I'd like ter see that show, mister!"

Van Decker was eager, and the stranger smiled slyly as he saw the countryman was on the hook.

In the mean while, both men had seen an obstacle to the success of their plans in the shape of Dennis Duff. Van Decker was green, but one look at Montague's Kid was enough to show that he was keen and experienced. If Calvin Garland and Jake Dowling had known the Duffer they would not have tried to tamper with him; as it was, while Garland talked to Van Decker, Dowling gave attention to Dennis and offered him a dollar to take a message to Harlem.

Negotiations were at this point when the Pennsylvanian succeeded in getting Garland's consent to conduct him to the mermaids, but the former broke in:

"Don't send the youngster away! I want him along to see the fun. Bub, you go with me!"

Cal and Jake looked disappointed, but Dennis was equal to the emergency.

He saw that Van Decker was bound to go to the lair of the alleged mermaids, and that no one but the Brown Sport could stop him. Since he was going, anyhow, it certainly would be best for a companion to be with him. The Duffer saw just what part he must play, and what impression he must make on the sharpers; so he secretly pulled Jake's sleeve and whispered:

"Say, boss, give us dat dollar, an' I kin be jest as mum in this section as in Harlem. See?"

His eagerness, and the "tough" air he assumed, swept the man's doubts away; he thought the boy was one who had the making of a rascal in his young head, and would never betray other rascals if paid to keep quiet.

It was formally settled that he should be one of the party, and the four moved away northward.

Dennis was well aware that Van Decker was in the hands of some sort of bunco men, but the victim's own obstinacy stood in the way of rescue. Even if saved by appealing to a policeman it would do no good; he was bound to be plucked by somebody before morning. On the other hand, Dennis had no great liking for the Pennsylvanian, and thought a lesson would do him good.

The sharpers finally paused in front of a house whose reputation the Duffer knew to be bad. It had been raided twice by the police, to his knowledge, but had gone along unmolested during the previous year.

If there was any species of evil-doing unknown to the house, Dennis knew not what it was. "Purgatory Coop," Dennis had once named it when talking with other boys, and the name clung to it.

They entered.

After ascending the stairs they entered a square room, where three other men were found to be present.

Cal introduced Van Decker to all, and then said with perfect gravity:

"We are going in to see the mermaids!"

CHAPTER VI.

VAN DECKER LEARNS A NEW TRICK.

"THE mermaids are not to be seen just now," was the ready reply.

"Why not?"

"They are asleep."

"Wake them up."

"Can't do it for an hour, yet. I will, then. You are not in a rush, are you, Cal? Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"Can we see the mermaids in an hour?"

"Sure!"

"How is it, stranger?"

The last question was asked of Van Decker, and though he was eager to see the ex-dwellers in the sea, he acquiesced and said he was will-

ing to wait. He was introduced, and all sat down.

Dennis Duff's chief wish was to be looked at as little as possible, and he found a chair in one corner. He wondered what kind of a trap was to be sprung. Young as he was he was confident that no such thing as a mermaid existed in the house or anywhere else. Did the trap lay in a bogus mermaid, or somewhere outside the domain of the charmers of the sea?

He soon found an answer.

Conversation was general and brisk for several minutes, and then one of the men, who was called Toby, observed to Cal Garland:

"I was showing Pat a new trick to-night, and I knocked him out of a V."

"What was the trick?"

"I'll show you, just for fun."

From his pocket Toby took three half-shells of walnuts and a bean. He showed them that all but the shell of the walnuts had been cut out, leaving a cavity inside.

"The trick is to put the bean under one of these shells; you to see me do it, plainly. Then I move the three shells about on the table—shuffle them, as it were—and when I stop, you guess which shell the bean is under. If you guess right, you win; if you guess wrong, I win."

"Thimble-riggers!" thought Dennis, in disgust.

"Well, that is new!" Cal admitted.

"Old as Methuselah," muttered Dennis, in disgust.

"I'll go you, once," declared Cal. "I'll bet a dollar I guess the right one."

"Done!"

Toby turned all the shells over. Under one he put the bean. Then he moved them about on the table for awhile, after which he directed:

"Raise your choice!"

Cal picked up a shell. The bean was revealed. There was a laugh at Toby's expense, and he insisted upon trying it again. This was done, and Cal lost. He lost four times in succession, and was three dollars out. Then he quit in pretended disgust.

Vandevere Van Decker had been an interested observer. He never had seen or heard anything like the game before, but he was stocked with enough sporting-blood to be fascinated by any game of chance. He wished himself in Cal's place, for every time the shells had been moved about, he had followed the one with the bean without trouble. He regarded Cal as very stupid to be deceived. He ought to have been a winner to the extent of four dollars, instead of losing three.

The Brown Sport's Kid expected to see him come in when the other man stopped, but he did not, and the thimble-riggers did not urge him.

General conversation was resumed.

One of the party soon made an excuse to get Cal to one side, and they went out of hearing of the other men, but near enough to Dennis so that, having unusually keen hearing, what they said was audible to him.

"Say, d'ye know the fellow you have in tow?"

"His name is Van Decker, and he's from Billy Penn's State."

"I know, but what more?"

"Oh! the Brown Sport has him under his wing, and I presume the old lad is to be fleeced."

"He is big game."

"How do you know?"

"He owns a big oil plant in Oil Gutter, Pennsylvania. A friend of mine who has the rocks was there and tried to buy it. He offered a good, round figure, but the Americanized Dutchman was too shrewd to take it. If you can get him to break the balls for you, perhaps you can get an interest in the oil biz for a song."

"Are you sure of what you say," Cal asked, thoughtfully.

"Well, not personally, but I got it straight."

"I suppose we might throw up the thimble-rigging, and work him for a bigger game. If he plays cards, and will drink a little more stuff, perhaps he would sign away a shake in the wells."

"Try him!"

At that moment Van Decker's voice rose audibly. He had been looking wishfully at the shells, which still lay on the table, and was able to control himself no longer.

"Say, stranger," he remarked, "I'd like ter try you on that little trick, myself!"

"All right; I feel proud of my luck, and had as soon have your money as any other person's," replied Toby. "But make the stake twenty-five cents. I don't want to rob any one."

Confident as Van Decker was he did not object to beginning light, and he agreed. The old process was gone through and he lifted the selected shell. The bean was under it; he was the winner. His face beamed with triumph, and he tried it again. Four times in succession he won. Toby looked downcast, but the Pennsylvanian was in high spirits.

"Let's increase the bet!" he cried. "It ain't enough. I've won four times, an' only got a dollar."

Toby pretended to hesitate.

"The trick has lost its charm for me, and seems childish," he finally answered, "but I'll go in once more on a revised plan. The stake shall be raised. I'll let you fellows bid, one against the other, and run the wager up as high as you please, if it's five dollars or more; and then I'll meet whatever sum you fix. See?"

Everybody "saw," and Toby put the bean in place. Van Decker watched the shuffle keenly, and when it was done he simply knew that he could tell which shell the bean was under. Bidding started at one dollar, but went up rapidly, the sharpers showing the jovial, happy-go-lucky air that always proves so infectious. Ten dollars, twenty, thirty and forty were called, with numerous bids between the round figures.

Van Decker was determined to have the chance of betting against Toby, but bets of this size he had not been accustomed to before. He grew a little wary, and the sharpers saw it.

He finally called out, "Fifty dollars!" with an air which told that it was his last bid, and no one went further.

Toby expressed the opinion that he had been a fool to make the compact, but vowed he would not back out. He and Van Decker each put fifty dollars on the table.

Up to that time the Pennsylvanian had not removed his gaze from the right shell. He was not suspicious, but did not want to get confused. Just then Dowling, as if by accident, dropped the ashes and a few hot sparks of his cigar on Van Decker's hand. The latter cried out with pain and instinctively danced up and down, but soon recovered his nerve and accepted Jake's apology.

"Lift the shell!" Toby directed.

Van Decker obeyed, and then stood aghast.

No bean was visible!

He had lost!

Toby coolly scooped in the fifty dollars.

"Luck always has to change," he calmly observed.

Not a word said Vandevere Van Decker. He simply had been sure of his position—or thought he had. How had the ruin occurred? When he had recovered a little he raised one of the other shells, and found the bean.

"I can't understand it," he said, blankly.

Everybody else could.

"Your eyes deceived you," remarked Cal Garland. "Well, never mind; you can stand such a trifle. Lucky we didn't run the bidding up high. Have a drink, old boy?"

Van Decker took the drink, but even then he repeated:

"Darn me ef I see how I made sech a blunder!"

Dennis Duff, silent but watchful, was not so much in the dark. The episode of the cigar ashes was only a trick to divert the Pennsylvanian's attention, and, while his gaze was turned away, Toby had quickly and skillfully changed the relative positions of the shells.

The time-worn trick of thimble-rigging had been worked successfully, with a slight variation in minor details.

After another drink all around Van Decker forgot the pang of his loss, and grew eager to see the mermaids. He was directed to wait awhile longer.

Dennis was growing anxious. He did not have any great good will for a man who would indulge in strong drink and make himself ridiculous, but the man from Oil Gutter was the Brown Sport's acquaintance, and Montague's "Kid" felt that he ought to be rescued.

But how could it be done? He was in the whirl of dissipation, and would object to leaving, even if the sharpers would allow it.

Dennis was growing nervous. Once, he went to the window, pulled the shade aside and looked out, determined to call a policeman if he saw one, but, as soon as the men saw his position, he was ordered away. Faces at windows were something these vultures did not approve of.

More liquor was offered the victim, and he did not refuse. The gang's liberality in this respect was proof that they were not done with him. What further did they contemplate? Dennis pondered on the point, but without getting light. Perhaps their design was simply to

rob Van Decker of his last dollar, and then turn him out into the street—and perhaps their design was darker.

Was it certain that they would allow Dennis, himself, to leave in safety?

The last speculation was so interesting that the boy finally obeyed a sudden impulse and walked quickly to the countryman's side.

"Boss," he said, "it's about time fer us ter meet the Brown Sport!"

"Eh?" cried Van Decker, with a start.

"Hev you's forgot the engagement with the Brown Sport?"

"Did I hev one?"

"Why, hev you forgot it?"

"Darned ef I hadn't, an' I don't remember it, now."

"Never mind that," added Cal, sharply. "We like your company, and can't give you up. You are going to stay right here, old man!"

CHAPTER VII.

ON HAND FOR THE CRISIS.

THERE was an emphasis to Cal Garland's declaration which troubled Dennis Duff, but Van Decker answered:

"By gosh! I don't want ter go. I'm all right, here!"

"Would yer be after breakin' yer promise to the Brown Sport?" Dennis persisted.

"Bub, I don't remember no such promise."

"He will."

"That's so; he don't forget nothin'."

"Go while you're sober," urged the boy.

"The Brown Sport will take your skin off ef he sees you drunk ag'in."

The Pennsylvanian started up.

"That's a fact, by mighty! I'll go!"

Garland grasped his coat-tails and pulled him back into the chair.

"You will stay here!" he declared, peremptorily. "You are drunk already, and this is the safest place for you."

"But the Brown Sport will be mad," Dennis insisted.

"He be hanged!"

"He ain't no mean enemy, me good sir."

"Do you threaten, boy?" blustered the sharper.

"No, but it's time fer this gent ter go."

"An' get arrested for being drunk, and babble on us all? I guess not!"

"I'll steer the ould tippler home."

"He stays here."

"All right; then I'll go alone."

"No, you won't! You want to go out and tell a copper of us, do you? It won't work; you will stay right where you are, to-night. In the morning, if we can fix things up, you can go."

Dennis placed no confidence in the last promise, and was uncertain when he would be at liberty again. The house had a bad reputation, and, before then, men had been found in the street drunk, moneyless and beaten, near at hand, who never could account for their mishaps. When suspicion pointed to "Purgatory Coop" some silent, unseen influence was used, and the place, despite an occasional raid, never had experienced any severe blow. Just what crimes were done there no outsider knew, but our young friend felt that, in his case, a life-insurance policy might not be a bad thing to have.

Not being in accord with the plan laid out he slipped away from the restraining hold Cal had put upon him, but another of the gang suddenly thrust out a revolver.

"Stop!" he ordered.

It was an argument not to be defied.

Dennis obeyed.

"Sit down!"

Reluctantly he sought the chair again. There was no visible sign of fright, and his eyes flashed indignation and defiance, but he was not rash enough to throw prudence and judgment to the winds. His break, however, had done much to sober Van Decker; the revolver had frightened that person, and his heart seemed to be down in the vicinity of his boots.

There was a long pause, and the crooks looked at each other in a way which indicated uncertainty on their part. A drunken man could be beaten into insensibility and thrown into the street, and he would forget where he had been when he regained his mental faculties, perhaps, but how was a keen, alert boy to be rendered harmless?

They had presumed on the fact that he was of humble life, but had found that he possessed unsuspected courage.

The word had gone around that their pigeon was to be plucked further, but, in a certain way, they were afraid of Dennis Duff.

He was no pigeon!

While the period of general hesitation was still unbroken, there was a sound of footsteps on the stairs which led to the outer door. This would have been strange to no one had the steps been quick and buoyant, or even uncertain like those of a drunken man, but they were slow, shuffling and deliberate. All looked with interest.

Then a white, bushy head rose to view, and was followed by that of a young girl.

Both reached the top of the stairs, and Dennis Duff actually turned pale. The girl was Molly McGinnis! Her young friend was horrified. Molly in that den of vultures! What madness had sent her there?

The man with her looked to be very old, feeble and poor, and, more than that, blue goggles told of poor eyesight. This ragged old traveler held out a bunch of lead-pencils and spoke in a cracked voice:

"Gen-tle-men, will you please help a poor old blind man?"

Cal Garland recovered his presence of mind.

"I'll help you down-stairs with the toe of my shoe!" he cried, starting forward threateningly. Molly extended one of her arms.

"Don't ye dare ter touch him!" she cried, defiantly.

Mechanically the crook paused.

"Don't anny man dare ter touch him!" she added.

"Hullo! here's a new Joan of Arc!" exclaimed Cal.

"My opinion o' you can be put in words that'll not be after needin' a dictionary!" Molly retorted. "Only a coward would lay his hands on a blind man!"

"Say, Dame Spiteful, how did you get in here, anyhow?"

"Sure, it was at the door."

"The door was locked."

"We knocked, an' an illegant red-headed Irishman let us in. It was no great trick, fer I watched an' see how the rest ave you did it whin you knocked."

"It's all right, I guess. Here, old man, here's half a dollar. Take it, and get to Halifax out of here."

"Ah! kind sir, me brother and son are here, and I am wanting them to come home with me," the blind beggar explained. "Are they not here, daughter?"

"You bet, pop!" Molly responded. "There they are!"

She pointed to Dennis and Van Decker, but the crooks were not so callow as to believe this.

"Now you're lying! These fellows are nothing to you. Get out, before we fire you!"

"We insist upon having the men," continued the beggar, in a firm voice.

"Oh! you do? Well, for a blind man you are rather flip. Girl, lead him down-stairs."

"She will do nothing of the kind."

"Then I'll drive those blue goggles through your apology for eyes. Get out!"

"One so old as I must take my time," asserted he of the goggles. "As for your throwing me down the stairs, I base my objections on the same basis that I demand the company of your guests."

"What's that, you old idiot?"

"Because it won't be safe for you to refuse."

Suddenly the speaker drew his form erect. He cast off the goggles and revealed eyes keen and sparkling. The crooks gazed as if fascinated.

"Gents," spoke the beggar, "you will do well to let me alone. I am Tom Tracer, detective!"

"Glory Ebenezer!" cried Dennis Duff, "you've come jest in time, Mister Detective!"

For awhile the dumfounded crooks had nothing to say. Nearly all of them knew Tom Tracer, and knew him as a man who stood high in favor among the detectives of Police Headquarters. Although still young, the very mention of his name was enough to send cold shivers along the spine of the average law-breaker of Gotham.

Cal recovered his power of speech.

"Say, Tracer, we haven't done anything out of the way."

"Oh! haven't you?" the detective retorted.

"Why do you object to parting with your guests?"

"We don't object, if you want them, sir."

"I do."

"Sure, an' it's good ter be wanted, ef the call comes from the right quarter," interrupted Dennis. "No mermaids an' cannibaws in mine, ef you please!"

"And you?" Tracer asked, addressing Van Decker; and that person, a good deal sobered, meekly replied:

"I want ter go home."

"His mother's after lookin' fer him," added Molly, tossing her head disdainfully.

Cal Garland and his companions were all in a quiver of apprehension, and they began to assert their innocence of all wrong intentions, but Tom cut them short:

"I am not after you, at present, and need not waste words with you. I'll bid you good-night. Go!"

The direction was given to Van Decker, who went humbly down the stairs. Dennis and Molly followed.

"Sure, ye jewel, you's come just in toime!" the boy declared, admiringly.

"Dennis Duff, you'd better go straight home ter your mother, an' stay there!"

"Hold a bit, Molly. What's the riot?"

"D'ye know w'ot would become of ye ef it hadn't been fer me an' the detective? I see you look out o' the winder, an' knew no good was afoot wid you in this house. I looked fer a policeman, but didn't see none, an' I asked what I thought was an old blind beggar ef he had seen wan; but it was Tom Tracer, an' in we come, fer we knew the secret knock, an' we fooled the doorkeeper. Now, Mr. Duff, where would you be ef we hadn't come in? Sure, you'll be breaking the mother's heart yet!"

Molly was both frightened and indignant, but Dennis answered in pacifying tones:

"Easy, me jewel, till you hear the verdict. We don't hang nobody in New York until the jury sets out on him, an' then ag'in, ropes ain't fash'nerble sence the new law's got ter toddlin'. Don't be after scoldin' yer cousin afore you know the fox, or there'll be a break in the family at Ballyragget."

"Dennis, I never wouldn't scold, but I've been scared so fer you."

"Jes' so; an' I've been skeered fer myself, b' mighty!"

By this time Tom Tracer was through with the crooks, and descended the stairs with bold, firm steps. They passed out on the street and expected to see Van Decker, but found that he had taken advantage of the lull to beat a hurried retreat.

"Let him go," the detective directed. "I have nothing to say to him, but with you I have business, if you will tell what has happened."

"Sure, yer Honor, I shall be proud," asserted Dennis.

"Then let us go to a more distant place and talk. My good girl, do you care to wait?"

"I may be necessary ter see Dennis home, for it's meself is thinkin' he's taken leave o' his senses."

"I'll answer for that; he is all right. But keep with us. My business will soon be done."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BROWN SPORT SENDS A MESSENGER.

TOM TRACER led the way until two blocks separated them from the lair of the crooks.

"Now, give me the whole story!" he directed.

Dennis obeyed. The fame of Tom Tracer as one of the keenest of Headquarters detectives was well known to him, and he was glad to be of service. Detectives and detective work had a charm for him, too, and he was proud of being thus honored.

Tracer listened attentively, and then remarked:

"I am not investigating Purgatory Coop, just now, though it seems that somebody ought to. You have done well to help Mr. Van Decker out of the fix his bullet head put him into. By the way, if he lives in Pennsylvania, what is he doing here?"

Very careless was the detective's manner, and Dennis did not suspect that the question covered any deep purpose.

"Dunno exactly w'ot he is here fer," the boy replied.

"Sure, he's sellin' sewin'-machine 'ile," explained Molly.

"Petroleum," Dennis corrected. "He owns a farm where all he has ter do is ter take an auger an' bore inter the ground, an' up will come enough kerosene ter more'n fill a lamp."

"I don't bel'ave it!" Molly declared.

"That's where you git yer kerosene, annyhow."

Tom Tracer smiled quietly at this argument. "So he is selling stock in the oil plant?" he questioned.

"I s'pose so, but I dunno."

"Has he a partner?"

"Can't tell yer, boss, I'm sure."

"Haven't I seen him with the Brown Sport?"

"Yes; but I don't reckon he is interested in 'ile. Roland Gustavus Montague ain't the man ter s'ile his hands with 'ile!"

Dennis elevated his nose at the mere idea of

his elegant employer dabbling in such a gross product, and Tracer saw that he would have to be cautious. Honesty, plain and straightforward, was perceptive in the boy in all ways, but it was also clear that he was devoted to the Brown Sport.

The detective questioned him as closely as he dared, but without eliciting anything very important. He was convinced that Van Decker and Montague were engaged in some swindle together, but just what it was he did not know.

Evidently the Brown Sport had kept Dennis ignorant.

Tracer decided not to press the point so as to arouse his companion's wonder, so he smoothed it over and quieted down all curiosity. He asked both Dennis and Molly to keep his share in events secret from all, and, proud of his confidence, they promised readily.

Then he left them.

They walked home, talking of Tracer and the recent adventure, and separated at the door of Molly's home. There her bantering spirit returned.

"Wouldn't it be well fer me ter call me father?"

"What fer?" Dennis asked.

"Ter see you home."

"Say, w'ot d'ye take me fer?" he asked, indignantly.

"Name it, an' you kin hev it. Sure I can't name you after w'ot I've seen the night of your foolishness."

"Miss McGinnis," quoth Dennis, with dignity, "I scorn ter be after noticin' your dispersions on me character. It is very clear that the Irish blood in yer veins is gettin' mighty thin, fer there niver was anny Irishman before that wa'n't generous."

Molly's heart smote her.

"Sure, Dennis, you don't think I meant it?" she asked.

"Didn't ye?"

"Indeed, I did not; an' you ought ter know I wouldn't scold you. But you scared me so!"

"Mary, you m'ane well, an' it's all right; of coorse I know me cousin would not go back on me. Shake hands! That's de stuff! An' now, Molly," he added, in the old humorous vein, "I reckon the cousins in Ballyragget, Kilkenny county, will breathe freer. There's after bein' no danger ave a scrap between the Duffs an' the McGinnises!"

Both the young people knew it was impossible for them to quarrel. Even as children they had always been the best of friends, and the recent sparring had no significance.

They separated; Dennis went home and to bed; and it was broad daylight before he was astir again.

During the forenoon he kept watch for Van Decker, but saw nothing of him, Tom Tracer or the Brown Sport. Purgatory Coop was calm and innocent, outwardly, and it was hard to realize that he had gone through such a narrow escape there, only a few hours before.

Calvin Garland and his fellows were invisible. Perhaps they were enjoying what they had won from Van Decker by thimble-rigging.

Shortly after noon Roland Montague appeared to his young associate. The former's face was calm and contented, and it was clear that he did not know of Van Decker's latest break. During the interview which followed Dennis felt that he ought to know, and experienced a guilty sensation that he should keep anything back, but the majesty of the law, as personified in Tom Tracer, was not to be defied.

"Well, old man, how are you?" Montague saluted.

"Way up in G, boss," the Duffer replied.

"All quiet along Greenwich street?"

"So-so! Ef you look you'll see every dealer has got his whole stock o' goods on the sidewalk, as usual. Say, ef I did biz there I wouldn't pay no rent, I wouldn't. Why should I, when the sidewalk is my main store?"

"The point is well taken. Great is Greenwich street; great for all things except pedestrians. They are not in it unless they can climb over the merchants' goods, or keep in the middle of the street. Are you busy, Dennis?"

"No."

"I have a job for you."

"Then you kin hev me fer a job."

"I want a letter delivered on Madison avenue."

"I'm the lightnin' racer fer the job."

"You are to go in a hack."

"St. Patrick defend us! Is it to a ball of the Four Hundred I am goin'? Why, I ain't got no dancin' pumps, nor cane, nor eye-glass; an' I can't walk like a dude, with my elbows stickin' out like yards on the mast of a vessel."

"You are not to fill that role."

"Bully! Anything but a 'slim' fer me."

"You simply are to go in the hack—or, rather, on the the seat with the driver, and deliver the letter. The result of said letter will be that the receiver thereof will leave her house, enter the hack and go to a place mentioned in the letter. You will continue to ride with the driver until the corner of Canal street and Broadway is reached, when you will alight, go to Cob Tolman's and wait until I join you. You know the place, don't you?"

"Sure!"

"Very likely the lady in the case will ask you certain questions. If she does, you are to know nothing whatever except that a business man, whose name you do not know, gave you this letter and told you to deliver it with all possible haste. See?"

"Sure!"

"Don't mention me in any way."

"Certain, not."

"And don't know any more than I told you."

"I'm mum."

"Here's the letter. Now, come around to the stable and I'll see you off on the hack."

"They went, but the Brown Sport repeated his directions before he let Dennis out of his sight, showing an anxiety not usual to him. And when the vehicle rolled away he stood looking after it in a very thoughtful way."

Dennis was by the driver's side and inclined to be sociable, but his wishes were not gratified. The driver was surly and curt, and gave no word that was not in keeping with his nature. Under these circumstances the Brown Sport's Kid soon took refuge in the company of his own thoughts.

"Wonder w'ot the boss has got under way, now?" he meditated. "Some boss-race, or pugilistic work, I guess, though why there should be a woman into it I don't know. They play the races, but I didn't know the Brown Sport had any on 'em under his wing. He looked anxious, an' I'll do the job up brown."

The driver knew their destination, and Dennis did not look at the address on the letter until they had drawn up in front of an elegant residence on Madison avenue. Then he read the name on the envelope.

"Miss Irene Elliston! I do believe that's the same as had the adventure on Murray street, though I didn't lay it up. No matter, though."

He rung the bell and sent the letter in, and then returned to the vehicle and mounted to the box. He was sitting there in a placid mood, when, a few moments later, Irene Elliston came out of the house hastily, equipped for the street. She hurried to the hack, and then looked at Dennis.

"Come inside with me!" she directed.

"Miss, I've got on ol' clothes, an'—"

"Never mind your clothes. Come, and be quick!"

Dennis noticed that her manner was agitated and troubled, and his naturally strong sympathies were aroused at once. She was pretty, refined, gracious and ladylike, and he took a fancy to her. He obeyed at once, and leaped down from the box.

"Drive back with all possible haste!" Irene then said to the driver.

He made a surly reply, and Miss Elliston and Dennis entered the vehicle.

"Did you personally see my brother?" she asked.

"Eh?" the boy questioned.

"Did you see the gentleman who was injured?"

"I didn't know nobody was hurt, miss."

"Where did you get this note?"

"A gent give it to me on the street. He didn't give his name."

"Then you have no later report?"

"No."

"But didn't you hear if he was dangerously injured?" persisted Irene, not willing to take a negative reply.

"I ain't up in the case, nohow. It's as I said; I don't know nothin' about it, except that the letter was give me as I said."

Dennis spoke the truth, but his mind was hardly at ease. The young lady's remarks indicated that she had been informed in the letter that her brother was injured, and he doubted if such was the case. A wave of suspicion rolled over him. Was she being deceived? If so, why?

"See if you know this place," added Irene, extending the letter and pointing to a certain place. "It is where I am to go. Do you know if it is a business house, or residence? Read the address!"

Dennis read, and his eyes dilated.

The place was Purgatory Coop!

CHAPTER IX.

AN EXCITING ERRAND FOR DENNIS.

"I WOULD like to know," added Miss Elliston, "whether the building is one devoted to business, or if my brother is in a private residence where he can receive good care."

"What does the letter say?" Dennis Duff asked in a low, peculiar voice.

"Read it!"

He obeyed. It was as follows:

"MISS IRENE ELLISTON:—I regret to say that my friend your brother Robert, has met with a painful and serious accident. I do not regard his injuries as necessarily dangerous, but the situation is extremely grave, and I would suggest that you come here immediately. Robert is eager to have you near him. The hackman will drive you to the proper address. Sympathizingly yours,

"E. D. CLINTON."

Then followed the street and number, to which Dennis's attention had been drawn already, and it was the infamous house known as Purgatory Coop.

"The driver is going very slowly!" exclaimed Irene. "Why don't he hasten? I want to get to my brother."

"Had you heard o' his bein' hurted afore you got this?"

"No."

Miss Elliston was too much bound up in her troubles to place any hidden construction on the question, but Dennis was looking at her in a fixed way. A painful and startling theory had been forced upon him.

She was being decoyed into a trap!

By whom?

He studied the handwriting of the letter. Had the Brown Sport been deceived, also? The writing looked unfamiliar, at first, but as the messenger scanned the words further, well-remembered peculiarities in the formation of certain letters began to reveal something more to him.

It was Roland Montague's own chirography, disguised, but not completely masked.

The Brown Sport's Kid was dumfounded. Why did that man want Irene to go to Purgatory Coop?

Michael Duff and his wife always had been poor, but they had given their children the most valuable inheritance of all—honor! By means of precept and practice they had taught the great lesson well, and Dennis had been a good pupil. Dishonesty and meanness he shrunk from and despised, and, now, he would not for a moment think of aiding to do wrong to Miss Elliston.

But was not wrong intended? "Purgatory Coop" answered for itself, and the fact that Montague was luring the girl there was equally emphatic. The Brown Sport's own reiterated commands that he was not to be mentioned was the blow that clinched the nail; it showed that he was working an underhand game, and had something to conceal.

Light broke suddenly upon the boy; he knew Montague as he was—knew that a great wrong was intended.

Dennis's own course was quickly decided upon.

"Ef I's you, miss, I'd go ter yer brother's office, first off," he advised.

"Why?"

"Do you know E. D. Clinton?"

"No."

"Did yer brother hev any business in that section?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then," said Dennis, with the air of a discoverer, "you kin depend on it that the Robert who is hurted ain't your brother Robert. Some other feller, sure!"

Irene's face brightened, but only momentarily. "How can that be, when the message came to me so direct?" she asked.

The boy was equal to the new emergency.

"When Robert No. 2 was hurted they looked in the Directory, seen Robert No. 1's name, an' s'posed they got the right one. Now, you take my advice an' go ter your brother's office, first off. It'll only take a bit longer."

"But the other place is this side of there?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I will first stop there. If there is a mistake, that is the quickest way of learning it."

Dennis saw that he must come to the point.

"Ef you value yer life an' safety you won't do it!" he declared, plainly. "I wanted ter save the facks fer yer brother's ears, first, not yours, but here goes. Miss, I do know that house, an' a worse you'll not be after findin' in New York. Confidence-men, bunco-steerers, gamblers, an' a good share of the Old Nick's children hang out there, an' you'd be no safer than a lamb among

wolves. This is all a plot ter decoy you there, you bet!"

Irene was startled, and, for a few moments, rendered speechless. When she rallied, her first question was practical and to the point:

"If you are advising me right, now, why did you act as the decoy you mention?"

"Cause I was taken in as bad as you, an' hadn't no idee where you was ter go until I read it in the letter. You go ter yer brother's office, first, an' ef I'm wrong you'll know it cheap, but ef you go ter Purgatory Coop you'll git yer experience dear. See?"

"I will obey you, I think."

"Decide quick, fer we're most ter the Coop, an' there's no backin' out when you strike there!"

"Tell the driver to change the route."

Dennis obeyed, but the surly hackman jogged along and did not even turn his head. The boy called again, and again he was ignored.

"The man is in the plot!" cried Irene, changing color. "He is determined to drive to that place, anyhow. Great heavens! what can we do?"

"Do?" echoed the Brown Sport's Kid, sharply. "Ef he don't let up I'll show ye—yes; an' I'll show him! I'll smash his measly old hack inter flinders!"

Raising his voice the indignant speaker added:

"Hi there, you gorilla on the box, you drive where I say, or I'll send a shock o' 'lectricity along yer spine that'll tear all the buttons off yer weskit! You hear me? Obey orders, or I'll smash out a winder an' yell fer the police like a cyclone. That's biz! Do I yell, or do you cave?"

The driver turned sullenly.

"What do you want?"

"We want ter be drove where I said."

"But the man who hired me said—"

"Don't keer w'ot he said. Do one o' three things, mister: Take us whar I say; drop us out here; or let me introduce yer to a perleeceman. Ketch on, cabby?"

The driver saw that his "fares" were not to be trifled with, and he drew up by the curbstone.

"Git out, ef you want to!" he growled.

"Sure, you're wonderful kind. Did the copper over beyanst be after changin' yer moind?"

There were times when Dennis broke forth broadly in the Irish dialect he heard talked so much at home, and now he was sufficiently elated to feel his best. A policeman and a cab were in sight, and the Brown Sport's Kid was calm as he assisted Irene out of the hack. In a short time the second vehicle was engaged, and they were on their way to Robert Elliston's office.

The first person they saw on reaching Elliston & Iber's was Robert, strong and well, giving orders to a clerk, and Dennis's veracity and judgment were established in Miss Elliston's mind.

She could hardly control herself until they were in the private office. Then the story was soon told. Robert listened, surprised and startled, but when he knew the facts, he shook the boy's hand warmly.

"You are a trump card!" he cried.

"Yes, but not the knave o' trumps."

"You are ace-high. Believe me, my lad, I shall not forget this great favor."

"Don't mention it, boss."

"Robert, from what, from whom has he saved me?" Irene asked, tremulously.

"Does not suspicion point all one way?"

"It points to one of two men."

"My lad, will you clearly describe the man who hired you to carry the note?" Robert requested.

Dennis was ready with his answer. For months he had done errands for the Brown Sport, and had admired that person greatly. Believing him honorable and "square" he had never thought to question his works or his motives, and had been truly faithful, but, almost as swift as the revelation, had been the change of his opinions and allegiance.

The Brown Sport certainly was guilty, and his "Kid" wanted no more of him.

"Et ain't necessary fer me ter describe him," he replied. "Miss, when you asked who give me the letter I told you he didn't give me his name. He didn't need ter, fer I knew it already. It was Roland Montague!"

Brother and sister looked at each other in silence.

"He told me not say who I got it from, an' I didn't, but I never s'pected mischief was afoot till I see where we was going, by the letter. But I knew that house, I did; an' I kicked right off."

"And we know the man!" added Robert, in a deep voice.

Dennis experienced a desire for information.

"What is he?" he asked.

"Gambler, adventurer, bunco-steerer and blackmailer!"

Elliston had asserted more than he could have proven, in his excitement, and Dennis was startled afresh. And this was the man he had believed in so fully!

"Irene," Robert added, "I think I see what Montague's plot was. Once in that house you would have been drugged, or otherwise deprived of coherent thought, and decoyed into marrying the Brown Sport. From the first I have had a suspicion that he hoped to win you out of all this wretched muddle. Something—a sudden idea, I think—led him to play a bold and desperate card."

"It failed," cried Dennis, "an' now you've got him."

"How?"

"You kin hev him arrested."

Robert shook his head.

"Why not?" the questioner persisted.

"I cannot explain why, but it is not advisable."

The explanation which was refused was read by Dennis in the faces of his companions; they dared not make the arrest.

"The Brown Sport has got some holt on them," thought the street boy. "What a rascal he is!"

The heir of the house of Duff would not have been so radical in his change of opinion, even in the face of strong evidence, if he had not read the Ellistons so well. It was plain to him that they were honorable and worthy of respect and belief.

Robert's troubled expression did not vanish, and, presently, he took Irene aside and talked with her privately for some time. Then he returned to Dennis.

"Young man," he spoke, earnestly, "we will allow you to leave us now, but let it be with a full understanding. You have done us a great, a vast favor. Words can not begin to express it; you have bound yourself to us with rivets proof against time and rust."

"Don't mention it, boss," was the protest.

"I must, because you shall be rewarded if I live. I want to know you better; to see you often; to help you as you have helped me. That is for the future. Now, take this for the present."

He extended a ten-dollar bank-note, and Dennis was human enough to take it without demur.

"Now, one thing more. If you hear of anything of interest, further, will you come to me with it?"

"You bet!"

The bargain was made, and after a little more conversation, Dennis left the office. He started toward Broadway, but had gone only a few steps when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

He turned and saw a keen, athletic young man and, despite the very different guise in which he had once before met the same person, he now recognized him promptly.

"Tom Tracer!" he exclaimed.

"Hush!" returned the detective. "Don't speak my name; the walls may have ears. What have you been doing in Robert Elliston's office?"

CHAPTER X.

STARTLING NEWS.

"I've jest sold out a hundred shares in D. L. & W. railroad stock."

Dennis Duff made the assertion gravely, and the detective smiled slightly.

"You feel more funny now than you did when you were yelling to the cabman to let you out of his vehicle."

"Hi! how did you know that, mister?"

"My story follows yours. I want to know what you have been doing to-day."

"Sure, an' I'm at yer service, Mr. Tracer."

Dennis had not lost his admiration for the gentleman from Headquarters, and he told the story in full, except that he did not give the Brown Sport's name. He always referred to him as "the man."

Tom Tracer was patient, and it was not until the narrator had finished that he asked:

"Who was 'the man'?"

"Roland Montague."

"What! your loved employer?"

"Say, mister, don't jump on me—don't! I feel as mean as ef I'd been after stealin' a widder's goslin's, by mighty! Yes, an' goslin's without pin-feathers or hair, too. I never thought the Brown Sport was such a man."

"Shall you stick to him?"

"Shall I? Great sneezin' cats! I guess not. Margaret Katherine Duff—which same is my mother by marriage—she's been related ter my father ever sence they jined their hearts, hands an' Irish stews; she would wollop my young spirit, an' trowsers, with a strap, ef she knew o' her Ballyragget offspring keepin' dubi'some company, an' my trowsers are sensitive ter straps."

"Who are you going to serve, then?"

"Don't s'pose you want a homely kid, with freckles on his face, an' a wart on his wrist, do you?" was the bold inquiry.

"I want you!"

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Honest Injun?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Tracer, I can scarcely b'lieve it! Me, be an ally of an A 1 detective? Borin' muskeeters! you don't mean it! No, you don't; but I won't let you back out. I take yer up at yer own offer, I do; an' here is ten cents ter bind the bargain!"

He extended a dime with perfect gravity and sincerity, but Tom Tracer assured him that a financial consideration was not necessary.

He stated, further, that he believed Van Decker and the Brown Sport were engineering some big plot, and that, of course, meant trouble and loss to somebody else, and violation of the laws of the good State of New York. The plot was still obscure, and Tracer had found it hard to grasp, but he believed he now saw his way clear.

"If you will enter my service I'll have you continue right along with Montague, do his errands as of old, act as of old, but learn more than ever, and keep me constantly informed. And as one event after another occurs, I shall probably see a point where I can work in counter-demonstration, and get at the plotters' secret."

"I'll do it, b'jinks!" Dennis cried. "But, hold on! Before now cabby has gone ter Montague an' told him how I knocked out his scheme."

"Wrong! Cabman's mouth is closed, and I have the key. He brought me here."

"Eh?"

"By mere chance I saw you and Miss Elliston leave one carriage and enter another, after you had alarmed the driver into letting you out. I immediately engaged the discarded driver to bring me here, and he told his story on the way down. Then I sent him away."

"But won't he peach?"

"No. The fellow is an ex-convict, and I know of an old offense which I could bring up against him at any time. I have not done it, for his former sentence seemed to be enough. I have, however, closed his mouth by threatening to bring up the other charge. I am positive he will tell the Brown Sport only what I have directed him to, and that is, that, on the way to Purgatory Cop, Miss Elliston insisted on getting out at a drug-store to get a remedy for sudden faintness; and then evaded him and you. You are supposed to be shadowing her, now, and that is the yarn you must corroborate when you go to Montague."

"St. Patrick defend us!" Dennis cried.

"What now?"

"Ef you ain't a dandy I'll sell out. Why, that little fiction is foine as silk, an' it'll knock Roland Gustavus gally west an' up in high G!"

"Don't let it put you in the way of fictions, but the only way to run down a rascal is to beat him out in the game of wits."

Tom Tracer gave some further directions, and Dennis avowed his determination to serve the man from Headquarters to the extent of his ability.

Then they parted and the new recruit started homeward.

It was two hours later when he encountered Molly McGinnis near her home.

"What's the matter wid you?" she asked.

"I'm well."

"You don't look it."

"You see too much."

"Sure, an' why shouldn't I be watchful of me cousin? Only the day me father was sayin' that them who come from Ballyragget ought ter stand by each other."

"The Ballyragget cousins always were great on that pint. Sure, I've been after seein' many the wan of them licked like a carpet because his affection wa'n't strong enough fer his cousins. The only way some men kin make their wives keep on a-dotin' on them is to thrash them once a day."

"It's meself would like ter see a man try it with me!" cried Molly, with spirit.

"It has ter be done," gravely asserted Den-

nis, shaking his head. "Women is naturally full o' evil propensities, rebellion, high-jinks, an' spite ag'in' work, an' ef a strap ain't took ter them occasional, they ain't no good."

"Sure, an' men are no good annyhow. The trouble is, they don't get licked enough when they're boys. Every family ought ter hev a machine ter do it, an' strap the boys to it ivry noight, an' let it paddle them just an hour: an' when not on the machine, a missionary ought ter be wid the boys all the time."

"I notice the girls take ter that kind o' missionary work!"

"They don't take ter the boys."

"They take after thim."

"Yes; a long ways after thim."

Dennis and Molly would not have been in their usual spirits had they not indulged in one of their good-natured brushes. Having done this, the former told Maggie all about his recent adventures.

This was no breach of confidence. Tom Tracer already had made friends with her, and had decided that she might be as useful in her way as Dennis.

Hence, she was to know everything, and was requested to be watchful.

"It's a right serious matter ter break away from the Brown Sport," Dennis remarked, in conclusion. "I ain't never done no errands fer him but simple ones, but he's always told w'ot he would fer me when I growed up, an' I thought I's on the road ter glory an' cash. He even told me he could hire me out, right away, ter a horse 'tout,' but of course I'd not be after goin' in ter no sech disreputable biz as that. Not fer Isaac!"

"Tom Tracer will use you better than him."

"Thomas is a slick chap, I'm after tellin' you, an' I guess he's honest. Anyhow, he's snapped the Brown Sport's game off the hook, an' Roland Gustavus ain't got no suspicion that he has been done up. Yes; you an' me will stick ter the gent from Headquarters, Molly, an' I reckon we won't be sorry. Now, I'm goin' home an' turn in early. I'm about fagged out, an' nobody knows w'ot the next call will be. No Ballyragget man ever knows jest when ter fight an' when ter pray, unless he does both at once."

Dennis went home, and only waited to eat supper before turning in.

But he was not to get the long night's rest he had calculated on. He was dreaming that he had hired the exclusive use of the East River Bridge for a year at fifty cents a week, when the great business scheme dissolved and somebody began to shake him rudely.

"Sure, be you's gone cl'ane out ave your own body an' moind?" demanded the voice of Mrs. Margaret Katharine Duff.

"The 'grip' has broke, an' two trains hev smashed into aich other right over Vandewater street," murmured Dennis, drowsily, still thinking of the big bridge.

"Begorra, Oi'll show yez dbat de grip is all roight, me lad!" quoth Mrs. Duff; and she lifted her son bodily and set him on his feet. "A foine duck, you are, ter be dr'amin' loike a lazy Turk whin you're wanted. The Duffs ave Ballyragget niver would own yez, an' the loike ave you will niver free ould Oireland; but phwat is ter be expected ave a b'ye that neglected ter be born in Kilkenny county, where his ansisters hev lived ever sence Brian Borohme was king ave the Emerald Isle?"

"Yes, an' they all died there, too," returned Dennis, now fully awake.

"Ah!" none ave your back talk now; sure, you's want ter get a move on, fer yer cousin, Molly McGinnis, do be waitin' at the dure ter see yez."

"Molly? Great hump-backed cats! Why didn't ye say so afore, instead o' talkin' about Ballyragget an' Brian Boil-me. Molly's great-grandfather's father was father ter my great-grandfather, an' I don't neglect my relations."

"Sure, the McGinnises ave Ballyragget are a foine family, though not aiquil ter me own, the McFinnegans, who always loighted Brian Borohme's pipe whin—"

Mrs. Duff never knew when to stop if once started on a subject, but she now found herself alone. Her hopeful son had hastened to meet his "cousin."

Molly was outside the street door, and Dennis noticed that she look troubled.

"Hi! Molly, w'ot's the word?" he asked, quickly.

"Bad!"

"Go 'way! W'ot is it?"

"I'm afraid Tom Tracer has come to grief."

"How?"

"Drowned in the river by the toughs!"

CHAPTER XI.

DENNIS TO THE RESCUE.

"GREAT Cicero!"

Dennis uttered the exclamation in dismay. Then he added:

"Sure, you don't mean it; you can't!"

"Well, that's what I'm afraid on," Molly amended. "They hev captured him, an' taken him away in a boat, an' if they ain't goin' ter drown him, what is it?"

"Gobbled Tom Tracer?"

"Sure!"

"Where? When? How?"

Dennis was startled and excited. His admiration of the Headquarters detective had increased since he entered his service, and he wanted to win glory side by side with that gentleman. But where did the alliance, the glory, and Tom Tracer come in, if the latter had gone to the river-bottom?

"It was like this," Molly explained. "I was over by the ferry with my basket of fruit as late as I felt like stayin', an' then I walked up West street. When I got ter the pier where Tim Killion used ter watch, I see how much darker it was than when Tim took care of it, an' while lookin' that way I see three men."

"Tom Tracer was one?"

"Yes; an' he was behind a bale o' somethin', pipin' the other two."

"Jest like Thomas; thar ain't no sand-fleas on him."

"I had jest made out that 'twas him when the other men left the further end o' the pier an' walked toward West street. They went careless-like, an' I hadn't no idea they meant any harm. I guess Tom Tracer hadn't, neither, fer he kept still where he was; but when the men got there, what did they do but turn quick an' just jump onter him."

"Sneezin' cats!"

"I was that scared," continued Molly, with a deep sigh, "that I couldn't get a joint ter movin' for a while, an' all the toime them three men was thrashin' about like they were crazy. Then I got a move on an' went for a copper, but I didn't find none."

"An' Thomas got drowned?"

"When I got back a boat was jest leavin' the pier an' three men was in it, an' as the light o' the lamp fell full on them for a bit, I seen one was Tom Tracer. They had him prisoner."

"Did ye know them?"

"No."

"Where did they go?"

"Straight out on the river until they disappeared in the dark."

"Mary Katherine, be you sure it was Tracer?"

"I be, that."

Dennis shook his head.

"No more sleep fer me, ter-night. I've got ter go an' rescue my boss. I don't b'lieve they've sunk him in the river, so I won't take no hook an' line, an' I ain't got time ter buy anny bait. I've got an idee. You come with me, Molly, an' we'll see if we kin get track of these measly abductionizers."

They hastened to West street.

"There's the watchman, now," added Dennis. "It's Mart Meroigan, a good-hearted feller; but he will sneak away from his post now an' then. Ef he'd been there, there wouldn't 'a' been no abduct, I take it."

The speaker marched out on the pier and accosted Mr. Meroigan abruptly. The latter at first denied having been absent, at all, but the strength of evidence forced him to confess, finally.

As Dennis had said, Martin was a good-hearted fellow, and he became interested, at once, on hearing of the alleged kidnapping.

"Sure, it war Water Bill who did it!" he exclaimed.

"Who's he?"

"A waterman that Oi know no good of."

"How d'ye know he did it?"

"Oi seen him an' anither mon sneakin' around with a boat, an' I once thought he had come in under me pier, but Oi could foind no signs ave him. Water Bill is a sneak-thief ave the river, an' we have ter look out whin he's around. He's the wan, begorra!"

Dennis thought the evidence weak, and said so, but Meroigan persisted until even the doubter began to believe.

"Sure, ef Oi was off duty Oi'd take me boat an' row you's over ter Water Bill's store-house."

"Where is it?"

"In Jersey City."

"But where?"

"Mum is the word, Dennis, an' ef Oi tell you, you must kape it still. Sure, we watchmen

along the water-front have all we kin do ter look out for river-thieves, annyhow, an' wance we get them down on us, our lives would be miserable. Besides, there's no knowin' what foggy noight they would sneak up an' give wan a bullet."

The young detective had heard this before, and did not wonder at Mart's caution.

"So," the watchman added, "though Oi know where Water Bill's quarters are, Oi wouldn't dare tell the police unless there was a chance Bill would be railroaded fer ten years, or such a matter."

"Wal, you jest vociferate the p'int o' compass ter me in a husky whisper, an' I'll help ye keep the secret. You're a Ballyragget man, an' I won't throw ye down."

"You know where Pat Norris's schooner lays?"

"Sure."

"Well, over beyanst the landin' you will see an ould buildin' which looks as ef it had been built a thousand years—"

"I remember it."

"Water Bill lives there, all alone. Ef the police were ter raid the ould hulk they would foind Bill's plunder, but it is supposed ter be a deserted place."

"Mart, will you's loan me yer boat?"

"Do ye be goin' there?"

"I be, Martin!"

"Water Bill will gobble ye."

"Not with my permission. I mean ter be sly, but ef I do get set on, why, I'll hev ter take my medicine."

Mart protested further, and so did Molly, but Dennis was not to be moved. He did not intend to do anything reckless, or pit his strength against the river thief's, but he could not rest easy when there were indications that Tom Tracer had met with trouble. Mart finally agreed to loan his boat, and made it ready.

Then Molly furnished a diversion by insisting upon accompanying her "cousin."

"You?" cried Dennis. "Sneezin' cats! who ever heerd of sech a thing? Sech business ain't built right fer girls."

"I ain't afeard," she persisted.

"I'm afeard for you."

"I guess I can go where you kin, an' it ain't right fer you ter go alone. You *can't* go alone; I'm goin', too. Now, there!"

Dennis found it harder to prevail over her than with Mart, and considerable time was wasted, but the watchman came to the rescue and declared that he would not let the boat go if a girl was to dare the river by night, and its natural dangers.

So Dennis went alone, but the last thing he saw as he rowed away in the darkness and fog was Molly standing on the pier, looking after him fixedly.

"Sure, that girl is a trump!" he murmured.

"There ain't many cousins so devoted, an' she only me great grandfather's great granddarter. But she's after 'resemblin' Brian Boroihme, who me mother tells of, a good bit, an' she's a hero. I reckon ef she'd been old enough when the war was down South she'd been a major-gineral, or corporal, or some high officer."

Molly faded from view, and the young adventurer pulled on across the river.

He was one of the many New York boys who, from abundant practice, were able to pull a boat with wonderful skill when current and tide sent the waters of the old North River strongly and fiercely toward the bay. More than a hundred times he had been out, wholly at ease, while inexperienced persons stood on the piers and wondered whence came the strength that defied the swift, curling water; and the present expedition was nothing, as far as the river was concerned.

The river was crossed uneventfully.

When he approached the other shore all was quiet.

He brought his boat up to the pier and secured it. Then he clambered up and looked around.

Satisfied, after a few moments, that no one was watching, he left the pier and sought the building said to be Water Bill's lair.

Its appearance corroborated what Mart had said about it, and Dennis could see no sign of life. It stood in an isolated position, and he was able to walk around it. At no point did a light show.

This at first caused him to doubt the reliability of his information, but a little reflection showed that if the river-thief was using it secretly, he would, of course, avoid all betraying signs.

Dennis listened at the door and windows, but could hear nothing to indicate that it was

occupied. He found, on examination, that the door and windows were fastened.

He hesitated to act further. If he forced an entrance he might get into trouble, for there was no proof that Tom Tracer was there, or that Water Bill had molested the detective.

The only evidence was guess-work on Martin's part.

For awhile Dennis wavered, but he finally resolved to take the risk. If he went in he would be able to settle the matter one way or the other, and if Water Bill had not been concerned in the fight on the other shore, he probably was away on some marauding expedition.

It was not hard to pry up one of the old windows, and he entered.

He was in a big, silent, musty-smelling room.

Lighting a match he looked around, and found himself the only person present. He located a door and went on, and, in a short time, had looked through the lower part of the house. Except for a small quantity of decaying furniture, nothing was to be seen there.

He ascended the stairs.

Above, a door stood open, and he went on into another room. Then, suddenly, he saw a gleam of light ahead, and one which seemed to come from under a second door. As he made this discovery, and came to a halt, there was a loud bang behind him. The door at the head of the stairs had blown to with a sound audible through the whole house.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN IN THE BOX.

Dennis was startled. It was clear that some one was in the house, and he did not see how any one but a deaf man could help hearing the noise.

Would it bring immediate discovery upon him?

He retreated to a corner of the room, and made himself as inconspicuous as possible, and the precaution was taken just in time. The door beneath which the light showed was opened, and a man appeared to Dennis's view. In his hand he carried a lantern, and the light revealed a figure remarkable for its breadth, and a bushy beard which framed in a red face like a glade in a forest.

This person advanced across the room. His gaze was directed straight ahead, and as the young detective was not in range, and the lantern's light was by no means brilliant, no discovery followed at that moment.

Dennis was satisfied that the big man was Water Bill, and it looked very much as if the man knew intruders were in the building, and intended to seize them.

It was just the time for bold action, and, believing that Tom Tracer must be in the other room, his ally was about to make a quick movement in that direction when, through the open door, he saw a second man.

He recognized Calvin Garland.

Sight of the thimble-rigger checked Dennis's plan of action, and the chance was soon lost. Water Bill opened the door at the head of the stairs, looked into the dark expanse below for a moment, and then calmly reclosed the door and locked it.

This done, he returned to the other room.

"Caged, by St. Patrick!"

Dennis muttered the words in a serio-comic way, but to most persons there would have been only what was serious in the situation.

The locking of the door cut off his retreat, and he practically was a prisoner.

Before entering he had noticed that the windows were clear on the outside, but examination, now, showed they were boarded up on the inside. More than this, the boards were thick and substantial; they seemed to be nailed securely; and there was no chance to push or pull them off.

Dennis had entered a veritable place of imprisonment, and the chances of getting out were not promising.

"An interestin' applesade, by ginger! My thirst fer adventure bids fair ter be gratified, an' I guess it'll be a reg'lar Noah's flood. By the time I git clear I won't be thirsty an' artom, an' the police force o' Gotham may lose a bright an' new-found star. There would be weepin' among the Ballyragget contingent, an' fer their sakes I'd kind o' like ter pull through. I don't want ter be mean!"

His thoughts drifted away from the general house of Duff, and its cousins.

"Cal Garland is in there. What does that mean? Is it merely a game o' the thimble-riggers, ter git square with Tom Tracer fer robbin' them o' their prey, t'other night?"

Dennis was recovering his nerve. He easily perceived that Water Bill had attributed the

violent closing of the door to the wind, or some natural cause, and that he was not under suspicion. He could not escape, but was it not possible to act inside?

He was determined to learn if Tom Tracer was near.

He went to the door and listened. There was a murmur of voices beyond, but no coherent words reached him. He lay down and tried to get some points by looking through the crack where the light showed, but this attempt resulted in nothing.

Being in a mood for risky venture he now prepared to take a bold step. He deliberately but very carefully, opened the door. Fortunately, no betraying sound followed.

A large room was revealed; one almost destitute of furniture. It was only poorly lighted, for only the lantern broke the darkness, and that was far from being as good as the average of its kind. It set on top of a dry-goods case of considerable size, and two men were playing cards by its apology for light.

They were Water Bill and Garland.

Dennis could not tell whether a prisoner was present or not, so, relying upon the darkness, he entered the room fully and closed the door.

Under more favorable circumstances he would have seen that the place was fitted out with a rickety stove, the dry-goods case, two smaller boxes used as chairs, and a bed on the floor.

These, with a few cooking utensils, made up Water Bill's visible property.

He and Garland were playing poker, and were deeply absorbed at that moment. Each had a hand upon which he placed some confidence, unless he was bluffing, and the betting, though slow, was firm. Dennis could see that Water Bill held three kings and a pair of queens. For a moment he vaguely thought that the river-thief was in the way of winning, but his mind soon turned to other matters.

The room received his closest scrutiny, but nowhere could he see Tom Tracer, and, while it was possible that he was stowed away in some remote corner, there was no reason to believe this true.

"I call you!" suddenly exclaimed Water Bill, throwing down his cards.

Cal scanned them for a moment, and then smiled grimly and turned the faces of his own pasteboards to the light. He held three aces and a pair of queens.

"Perdition!" Bill exclaimed.

"I'm just one over you, William."

"You always have three aces. Whar d'ye get them?"

"Out of his sleeve!"

The last words came in a hollow voice, and Water Bill kicked the dry-goods case.

"Shut up!" he growled.

"As my guardian," added the hollow voice, "I advise you to look out for Esquire Garland. He is a slippery fellow, and probably lined with aces and kings."

"Don't mind him, Bill," interrupted Garland.

"I play a square game."

"Ask him what the game is, William," advised the hollow voice.

"It's poker!" snapped Calvin. "Do you want to try me a back?"

"Not unless you cut off your sleeves."

"Bill, don't mind him; he is sore, and wants to make trouble between friends."

"Between sharks, you mean," averred the hollow voice.

Puzzled at first, Dennis had not been long in deciding as to the source of the voice.

There was a man in the big box!

Was it Tom Tracer?

In vain the boy detective tried to settle this point. The box and the almost-empty room were alike against any such discovery, and all speech there had about the same sound. Still, Dennis's hopes went up greatly; if the man in the box was not the Headquarters detective, who was it? Tom Tracer's ally believed he was on the track.

Cal Garland dealt with that careless grace never seen but in an old card-player. Water looked at his hand and found he had a "bob-tail flush"—the ace, king, queen and jack of spades, and the five of diamonds.

He hesitated. Of all hands the straight flush was the hardest to fill. Should he draw to it, or not? The decision was finally made, and he flung down the five of diamonds.

"Gimme one!" he directed.

Cal took three, and the fresh cards were dealt. Water Bill had acquired the five of clubs, and he was a supremely disgusted man. He tried bluffing and run the betting up a little, but lost his nerve and called.

Garland threw down a pair of fours.

"An' I had a bob-tail flush!" lamented Bill. "One more card would have done the biz, but never a tenner came my way."

"Look up Cal's sleeve," suggested the man in the box.

"You think you are mighty funny, Tom Tracer!" cried Cal, angrily, "but I reckon we have as much reason to laugh as you. You won't see Headquarters again, right away."

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"Other men have indulged in the same fond hopes, only to get left in the end. Some of them have become proficient workmen at Sing Sing. Perhaps you will make their acquaintance, later."

"Oh! you won't slip out of the Brown Sport's grip!" Cal retorted.

"Hush!" Water Bill sibilated, angrily.

"Let the gentleman talk," answered the man in the box. "He can tell no more than I know already. The Brown Sport hired you to kidnap me, though what he has against me, I don't know."

"Ask Vandevere Van Decker," suggested Cal.

"Oh! So the Pennsylvanian has overcome his fear of Montague enough to tell the latter that he went into Purgatory Coop and got plucked by you and the thimble-riggers, has he? And the sleek Mr. Montague scents—what?"

"Bill," requested Garland, "let the detective out of the box. I want to talk with him, and I can't chin with a man I can't see."

"He's all right whar he is," the river-thief growled. "When he's in thar I know jest where he is. It's the most convenientest prison I know on."

"But why not have him out to look at?"

"Look at me, ef you want ter use yer peepers."

"William, you are not handsome enough."

"Anyhow, I've got the stuff, there!"

Bill patted the muscle of his big arm, and the argument was one not open to refutation. Garland looked disappointed, and followed up his remarks with further words which gave Dennis a new idea; he suspected that Water Bill was as loyal to the Brown Sport, his master, as the typical bull-dog he so much resembled, while Cal was interested chiefly for himself.

The idea was strengthened when it came out that Montague had hired the river-thief to abduct Tracer, leaving him to select an associate, and he had chosen Cal.

Whether the employer would have approved the choice, was a matter open to doubt, and the watcher suspected that Cal was all ready to turn traitor if he could further his own interests by doing so.

But this did not help Dennis in the existing emergency, and, no doubt, the thimble-rigger would fight as zealously as Bill, if there was need of it. Only cash in hand could turn his allegiance.

Dennis meditated while the men continued to play poker. He had found Tom Tracer, but how was he to help him? Certainly, he could not overcome the captors, and there was no way for him to summon help.

The situation was all against him, and his own boldness had placed him where he was liable to be discovered at any time, and made a fellow-captive with Tracer.

CHAPTER XIII.

DENNIS BECOMES ACTIVE.

THE attention of both card-players suddenly wandered. They had been running the betting up, with Water Bill playing a "bluff," when there was a loud pounding below.

"Somebody at the front door!" Bill exclaimed.

"Have the police got track of us?" Cal asked, anxiously.

"Mebbe."

"Look out, and see."

"Can't do it here; got ter go below. Say, this jigger must be silenced!"

The river-thief caught up a piece of cloth, and unceremoniously stuffed it into Tom Tracer's mouth, making it impossible for him to cry out.

"Come with me!" he then directed. "Ef it's the perleece, an' they try ter break in, we've got ter fight them every inch; that's all. We might as wal be hung fer sheep as lambs."

He drew a big revolver and marched out of the room, and Cal followed him. The latter's expression did not indicate that he would enjoy a fight with the police, but Water Bill's manner was so commanding that he did not yet interpose an objection. He, however, had less to fear than his rough companion, for less could be proven against him in court.

If they had tarried by the door after passing it, they might have heard a suspicious sound back of them, but they neither heard nor saw what was transpiring there.

No sooner had they disappeared than Dennis Duff sprung up out of the dark corner and crossed the floor with quick, light steps. The door never had been provided with a lock, but Water Bill had fixed a cross-bar which was a good deal stronger than any lock. This bar Dennis hastened to put in place, and the kidnappers were fastened out.

Then he hastened to the box.

"Hi! be you there, Mr. Tracer?" he cried, eagerly.

The detective was there, as could be seen plainly, but was not in condition to speak. An apology for a bed had been made there, and Water Bill had put him inside so that he would be under their very eyes, as it were, while they engaged in their game.

Dennis's first act was to pull out the gag.

"Hasten!" Tom exclaimed. "Release my hands."

"You bet, me hearty!"

The boy had drawn his pocket-knife, and he severed the cords on his employer's wrists and ankles as soon as possible. Tracer hastened out of the box. For the first time he recognized his rescuer, but only gave him a hearty hand-shake, wasting no words.

"What's the situation?" he demanded.

"Sure, there's no name for it, but it's a screamer. I don't know who's knockin' at the door, but the man-trappers hev left the room, an' I've barred them out. See?"

He pointed to the door.

"You are a brick!" the detective declared.

"Can we get out of here?"

He glanced at the open windows, and Dennis ran to one of them and tested the fastenings. They seemed to be strong enough to defy their efforts utterly.

"There ain't nothin' here ter pry them off with, neither," he observed.

"The room is still our prison. The windows are fast, and to pass the door means to encounter the enemy."

"I hope the perleece hev come."

"As far as our foes' theory is concerned we may as well dismiss the hope; it is not at all likely I have been followed from New York. The one hope is that the local officers are raiding the old watermen, and that, I don't imagine is the case."

"Hark! there's yellin' down below!"

Dennis quickly stretched himself out on the floor by the door, and put his head close to the crevice below it.

"Go away, you drunken fool! or I'll be out thar an' mash you in the jaw!"

This belligerent speech was from Water Bill, and it told the whole story. The disturbers of the waterman's peace were not policemen, but common roysterers of the night. Dennis rose.

"They'll be back in a jiff, an' when they find the door barred agin' them, there will be a tall cyclone with whiskers on top of its head, bellerin' around here an' tearin' up the yarth with its horns."

Tracer looked around the room, and then shook his head.

"We are utterly without weapons," he confessed.

"Fact, by St. Patrick!"

"All depends upon keeping the door intact. The dry-goods case will make the barrier a little stronger; let us wheel it up against the door."

This was done, and none too soon; Bill and Cal were heard approaching, and angry words from the former were audible.

"It was a gang o' young toughs who live a few blocks away; fellers that every policeman is onter, yet they never did a decent job in their lives. Before they will be any good in the brotherhood of rogues they must hev some o' their freshness cut out, like weeds, by time. A boy, between eighteen and twenty-five, thinks he knows it all, but his brains wouldn't fill a thimble. Freshness, an' gall, an' conceit, withers his brain up, an' it's got ter smell with age afore he can tap a till, work the docks, or— Hullo! what makes this door stick?"

Water William had attempted to re-enter the room with the same ease which had marked his exit, but the door did not yield. He tried it several times.

"That's confounded odd!" he added.

"What is the cause of it?" Cal asked.

"Just w'ot I don't know."

"It isn't the latch."

"No. Darned ef it don't act as if the bar was up!"

"Can Tracer have got free?"

"Not by a long shot, when Water Bill tied the strings."

"But I believe the bar is up."

"I know it is. Gosh all thunder-claps! what does that mean? Say, one o' them toughs has got in an' fastened us out."

"Break in the door!" Cal advised, hurriedly. "If he sets that detective free it means Sing Sing boarding-house for us!"

Bill flung himself against the door.

It stood firm.

"He can't break that bar," chuckled Dennis.

"He can do worse, as soon as the idea occurs to him," Tracer gravely observed. "The bar crosses the door at its strongest part, and must be well-nigh impregnable, but the panels would not long resist assault. Once they get a hole through, too, they can turn their revolvers on us, wherever we may stand."

This startling fact troubled the heir of the Duffs, and made him more than ever anxious to get away. How could it be done? The windows had been tested and were out of the game. They must go down or up, if at all. His gaze wandered, and then he suddenly grasped Tracer's arm.

"Say, mister, w'ot d'ye call that?" he demanded.

Following the boy's suggestive forefinger, Tracer saw in the ceiling something that had before escaped their notice. A space had been cut in the top of the room, and there would have been a hole three feet square had not a board cover been over it. The detective caught the idea at once.

"Quick!" he whispered. "Get the box under it. We must go up, unless that cover is nailed down."

"Correct fer Dennis! I don't want no bullets fired inter my figger, fer my bones would jam them all out o' shape. Ez the minister said when the old sheep butted him in a belated part o' his anatomy: 'the impact was painful; an' twould be so ef a lump o' lead shook hands with my hip-joints. Up we go, Gallagher!'"

Mr. Duff's spirits were rising, and so was his person. He leaped to the top of the case and reached for the cover of the aperture. All depended on whether it was fastened down.

He touched it; it gave way.

He seized the firm sides of the opening, and, as Tracer gave his help, went up lightly. The detective followed without any great trouble. They were in a very dark loft, the roof of the house being so low that Tom could not stand erect.

"Where was Moses when the light went out?" Dennis demanded. "The chestnuts o' that joke are here, an' this is the place where Moses was. It's sacred soil. Mebbe McGinty, Gallagher an' Little Annie Rooney room here. Better hev chestnuts than Whisky Bill an' Thimble-rigger Cal."

"What we need most is that lantern."

"Say, I'll git it!"

Tracer stopped his impetuous ally. Bill and Cal were flinging themselves heavily against the door, which was beginning to crack and splinter.

"It is not safe."

"But we must hev that lantern. Somebody gets odds by means of it. Shall it be us, or them? Say, mister, I must go!"

"Then make haste!"

Down through the opening Dennis went. It took him only a brief time to reach the lantern, but as he did so a part of one panel flew in, and he could see through the ragged hole thus made. He sprung back to the box, the lantern was passed up, and his friend seized his arms.

"Hold up, thar, or I'll shoot yer!" roared Water Bill from the outer room.

A revolver was thrust through the broken panel.

With one leap, aided by Tracer, Dennis gained the loft, and the waterman growled an angry exclamation at having his target thus disappear.

"We are the roosters on the top ave the heap, sure!" the boy exclaimed.

The detective did not answer. He was using the lantern to look around. He knew the enemy would try to follow them. Had they any means of repelling an attack? He caught sight of a stout stick which was well calculated for a club, and caught it up with an air of relief.

"It means sore heads for them, now, if they try any hostilities at close quarters," he declared.

The door gave way entirely before repeated assaults, and, as it flew from its hinges abruptly, both Bill and Cal followed it and fell sprawling on the floor.

"Say, something's been after droppin'!" taunted

ingly called young Mr. Duff. "Get a derrick, an' raise up the old stiff!"

But the fallen men sprung to their feet much quicker than was to be expected, and Water Bill raised his revolver. The fugitives prudently made themselves invisible.

"Say, come down out o' that!" roared the waterman.

No one answered.

"I mean biz, an' don't yer forget it," he added. "Come down, or I'll shoot the both o' you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW DANGER APPEARS.

"LET him talk," Tom Tracer calmly observed. "It is action, not words, we have to fear."

Water Bill was no coward, and he made a motion to leap up on the box, but the detective displayed his club at the opening.

"Keep down!" he quietly directed. "If you show your unsightly head up this way, it will be the first sufferer."

"See yere!" cried the waterman, "w'ot do you mean by such infamous conduct?"

"What's the trouble, William?"

"What business have you up thar?"

"My friend, feeling the difference in our worldly station, I have decided that I ought to inhabit your garret, rather than your parlor. Observe my extreme humility, and let me have my way. I don't feel at home with you."

"You talk like a child, but I am a man o' business. I don't know how the dickens you got loose, but there you be. Now, ef you don't come down I'll wing you."

"Proceed, waterman!"

"Do you see this revolver?"

"No; and I don't care to. I am not big enough fool to exhibit my head to you and get a bullet as a reward. I can't see you, and you can't see me, but I have you foul. In this case clubs are trumps and a long reach counts. I can defend my position without showing so much as a finger, and you can rest assured that the man who dares get on that box will get a broken head!"

Water Bill was angry, and he proved it by an extemporaneous, lurid and disconnected series of remarks which would have shocked a person who was opposed to violent language. In fact, he tore passion in tatters, and discharged words which, as Dennis Duff averred, "raised a right smart smell o' brimstone."

When the waterman calmed down somewhat he and Cal Garland consulted. Although the former had come near getting a shot at Dennis, they had not seen the boy distinctly enough to recognize him, or, indeed! to see that it was not Tracer himself.

They were greatly puzzled to know how the detective had escaped.

They had left him strongly bound, and experienced Water Bill had tied the cords with the skill of the sailor and the roughness of a merciless captor.

Yet, the cords had been neatly cut, and he was gone.

They could not understand it in any degree, but they abandoned vain speculations on the past to plan for energetic action in the future. How were they to recapture him?

Water Bill had been given to understand that it was a matter of great importance that Thomas Jefferson Tracer should disappear from the haunts of men for a time. Mr. Vandevere Van Decker had told the Brown Sport of the adventure with the thimble-riggers, and the part Tracer had played, and the Sport's fears had been aroused at once.

He hired Bill to seize the detective, and reiterated the importance of holding him fast.

The men did not see their way clear to get at their prey. There was but one means of access to the loft, and sight of the club Tracer had waved over the opening convinced them that he could defend that point.

In the mean while, at the detective's suggestion, Dennis had taken the lantern and made an examination of their new quarters. The place was at once a refuge and a prison. It had no skylight or window, and was a bare, unfinished wilderness of rough timbers, splinters and cobwebs.

"There ain't no way out except by the roof," he announced.

"Can you break through that?" Tom asked.

"Dunno. It seems pretty solid."

"Time ought to have decayed it."

"Guess it's been in other business; don't see no favorable symptoms, I allow."

Dennis pushed stoutly against the roof, but failed to make an impression.

"We have got to force our way out, some-

how," Tracer declared. "Even the coming of day would bring us no relief, for we cannot get the attention of an outsider. We simply are bottled up here, where we can depend only on ourselves. You have done me a vast service, Dennis, but I fear you will have cause to regret your brave course in coming to my rescue."

"Go 'way!" was the emphatic advice. "I'm jest in my glory. S'pose sech a small thing worries me?"

"What if we stay here until you get hungry?"

"Why, then I'll send a messenger ter Del-

monico's fer a dish of r'ale Irish stew."

"We are in a stew, already, but it's not the kind so dear to the heart of St. Patrick's followers."

Water Bill now claimed attention.

"Say, up there; be you goin' ter surrender?"

"I think not. We haven't heard of such a move."

"We are goin' ter smoke you out."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes. We'll build a smudge here; the smoke will all ascend, an' you'll be smothered."

"William, you amuse me. Go on with your fun. When the smoke is started I will simply put the cover over this hole in the ceiling, and not enough will get up here to tickle our nostrils."

The waterman again indulged in forcible language.

"Say," he added, "ef you don't come out we'll set the old house on fire. It will burn like tinder, an' roast you alive."

"That's better. Go ahead!"

"We mean it."

"Proceed, William!"

Bill was growing more and more angry, and he vented his wrath in the usual way. Then he added arguments and threats. He was ugly enough, just then, to do anything, but he preferred to frighten his opponents. The old building had been a home to him for months, and though the theory that he had stolen goods stored there was not correct, he disliked to destroy his own refuge.

Yet, if Tracer escaped it would be a refuge no longer. He was disposed to go down with flying colors.

Once more he tried to move Tom Tracer, but without success. Then he left Cal Garland on guard and went to the lower floor. He returned bringing an armful of small boards and splinters. These he piled up against the partition between the two rooms.

"It'll make a mighty lively blaze," he observed, in a loud voice. "Every part of the old rookery is dry as dust, an' it will burn in a twinklin'. Five minutes after I touch her off with a match, the whole ranch will be a fiery pit of roarin' flames."

"Suppose the blokes above make a rush for life?" questioned Cal, in the same tone.

"Oh! we'll stay until there's no hope for them, an' shoot the elbows off o' 'em ef they show up."

"It will be smoky and hot in the attic, won't it?"

Water Bill laughed hoarsely.

"Say, old man," he returned, "won't they have a pile o' fun?"

Tom Tracer knew this talk was simply to frighten them, but there was no denying that the case was very serious. They could not go down, and there was no visible way of going up; the fire certainly would devour the old ruin in a short time; and even if the police discovered it in due season, they would be too late to save the adventurers in the loft.

The detective tried his luck on the roof, but failed to make any impression.

"I wish I knew what would be the result if you were to surrender," he remarked, thoughtfully.

"Why, mister?" Dennis asked.

"I am not disposed to give way an inch, but if those men had one grain of human feeling left, they would consider your age and let you go free, if you surrendered."

"Sneezin' cats!" cried Dennis, "but they won't get no chance. Surrender? Not ef the house o' Duff ain't lost its backbone. Why, in Ballyragget, Kilkenny County, when a Duff got inter a fight he never showed the white feather. Either he won, or kept on fightin' till he died of old age. Say no more on that head, boss; I won't desert the flag!"

"You are a hero."

"I'm just wonderin' ef I ain't a strategy-feller, too."

Dennis had been giving some attention to the chimney. It was old-fashioned, and, in the loft, pierced for the entrance of a stove-pipe, that being the method of heating the house. And

around the pipe there was an irregularity of the bricks which gave him an idea.

He proceeded to disconnect the pipe, and one of the bricks which had rested upon it fell down. He borrowed Tracer's club, and found he could pry them away without much trouble.

"The mortar was no good," he commented, "though I've heard they made good mortar in old days, generally. This don't prove it."

There was now an opening big enough to admit the body of a man, and he held the lantern up and scanned the interior.

"Say, boss!" he exclaimed, "we kin go up like monkeys. Things was fixed here fer the chimney-sweep. There's cross-pieces o' iron bars, an' it won't be no work at all. Whoop!"

Tom Tracer had been too busily engaged in watching the men below, who were about ready for their bonfire, to give much heed to his young ally's operations, but this low-spoken, but jubilant, revelation fully aroused him.

"Is this really so?"

"Sure!"

"Is the chimney big enough to let me up?"

"Sure, ag'in!"

"Dennis, your head is a good many years older than your body."

"I ain't got no gray hairs, or flies, boss. Now, jest let us hustle. We want ter git on that roof in about two shakes of a mule's north-west heel."

"Hold a little, my friend. I must remain here until there is no danger that the enemy will follow. If we both desert this loft they will soon know it, and jump our claim; a step which would give them a big advantage. Go you up, Dennis, and see what the situation is. See if there is anyway to get down from the roof, if once we go out there."

"I'm on!"

Dennis made for the chimney, and was soon ascending. He never had acted the chimney-sweep, and knew but little about the place, but now found the odor anything but pleasant. Naturally bad, the air was filled with soot by his own movements, and he could not avoid sneezing.

"I'll soil me clothes, too," he muttered, in serio-comic vein. "Hullo! w'ot's that?"

One of the bricks near him loosened and fell.

CHAPTER XV.

WATER BILL KEEPS HIS WORD.

FOR a moment Dennis thought he was caught in a bad trap. The fallen brick had connected with the iron rod he had seized last, in his ascent. More than that, it had fallen in a bed of soot, and the stuff floated up so he could not breathe with comfort for several seconds.

His chief worry was about the condition of the chimney, however, and when he was able to investigate he found to his relief that the bar was still firm. He resumed his way and reached the top.

Then it was easy to drop to the roof.

The top of the building was nearly flat, and he now had a good view of the surrounding area, but nowhere could he see any person moving, nor was there any inhabited building near at hand, as far as he could see.

There was no perceptible way of giving the alarm.

Convinced that they would have to depend upon their own efforts, he made a hurried examination. The old rookery was not high, considering its number of floors, but was sufficiently so to make a leap for safety far too hazardous to be considered. No fire-escape was to be expected, and there was none.

Only one chance could he find.

A stout pipe for water extended down from the eaves, and when he had tested it, he felt sure he could slide down in safety. But how about Tom Tracer? The latter weighed down well, and there was reason to doubt that the pipe would hold him.

Returning to the chimney Dennis was about to go down and rejoin Tracer when he heard a scrambling inside and saw the detective ascending. Under the latter's weight the whole structure showed signs of going to pieces, but he came up in safety and soon stood beside his ally.

"The house has been fired!" he announced.

"Sneezin' cats! Then their nibses is in earnest, be they?"

"The match has been applied, and the old building undoubtedly is doomed. As Water Bill said, it will burn with a rush. I kept at my post as long as possible, and then beat a retreat. Bill again tried to move me, but I resolutely refused to surrender. They saw the

folly of talk, and, determined to silence me, applied the match."

The detective had spoken rapidly.

"Hope they'll singe all their whiskers off!" averred Dennis.

"What are our chances of escape?"

Tracer's aid led the way to the water-spout, and the former quickly tested it.

"Go down!" he directed. "I'll hold fast to the top, which will add somewhat to its security."

Dennis obeyed promptly. His companion enabled him to get a strong and steady start, and down went Dennis in the best of shape. He was both light and strong, and he scored a victory.

He shook his head doubtfully as he saw Tom prepare to follow. Would it bear the strain? There had been no shaking before, but it was to be tried severely now. A fall from the top might mean death.

The detective swung himself around carefully and began the descent. Really, he expected a fall as soon as all his weight was trusted to the spout, and it did creak and tremble. He was not disposed to flounder around in mid-air long, not having the skill of a boy; and he promptly allowed himself to slide as fast as possible and not run fresh risks.

While he went he could hear sounds inside which proved that the fire had already gained strong headway.

Probably Bill and Cal had opened the doors, creating a current of air which fanned the hungry flames.

"Glory St. Patrick!"

Dennis uttered the unique exclamation joyfully as his leader's feet touched the ground.

"Chafed and splinter-pierced, a trifle, but still in the ring!" Tracer coolly observed.

"An' where are Bill Mud an' Cal McGinty? Still inside, an' ketched with their shoes unshined an' untied. Sure, they'll niver win a race ef any other horse is in it!"

"The flames must soon break out, and I have some hustling to do. I am unarmed, and Bill and Cal are well heeled and ripe for business. I want to arrest them, and the only way is to get help. We can't defy their revolvers. Come with me! We must find police and firemen."

In the mean while the waterman and his ally were on the lower floor. At first they expected their coveted prey to succumb and come down, but when the floor above became a roaring vault of fire which no one could defy, they looked at each other blankly.

"Kin it be he will let himself be burnt up?" asked Water Bill, wonderingly.

"The idea is wild; no man would be such a fool. You told me he could not break through to the roof, but that's just what he has done. You can depend on that."

"We'll see!"

The waterman ran outside, secured a long ladder, raised it and mounted to the roof. There, his belief seemed to be confirmed; there was no break in the roof. He thought of the chimney, though not with seriousness, but when he looked over the top, the fierce heat drove him back.

He descended and rejoined Cal.

"The man is dead!" he announced. "I know it!"

Garland looked bewildered, but failed to combat the theory, impossible as it seemed to him.

At that moment the flames burst out and the cry of "Fire!" soon sounded from a vessel. Bill and Cal retreated to a distance. After awhile the firemen came with a rush, but too late to save the old shell. It was ablaze from end to end, and doomed.

The incendiaries went forward and joined the crowd. They wanted to see if Tom Tracer was there, and believed themselves sharp enough to see, and yet remain unseen, if he was alive. This, Bill did not regard as possible.

For some time this fond belief received no check, but just as the waterman decided that the detective had gone to ruin with the building, some one put a hand familiarly on his arm.

He turned, and then stood aghast.

Tom Tracer was beside him!

"A lively blaze, William!" remarked the man from Headquarters, calmly.

Water Bill was speechless.

"I live in New York," added the detective; "but as you hang out on this side of the river, perhaps you can inform me on one point: Under the laws of New Jersey, what is the number of years imposed on a man who commits arson, when human life is endangered thereby?"

The river-thief had nothing to say, and he made a move to escape in the crowd.

"One moment," Tracer requested. "Let me introduce you to my friend, Mr. Nipper. He is a detective, and has very *taking* ways!"

Tom deftly grasped one of Bill's arms, and, a moment later, the stern-looking man facetiously referred to as "Mr. Nipper" had adjusted handcuffs to Bill's wrists.

Cal Garland was under watch, too, and was arrested at about the same time.

Both men slept under police surveillance, that night.

In due time Dennis and Tracer crossed the river together. When they separated the former went home and retired. His sleep was not of the best, for he passed through a new, but imaginary, set of adventures, in dreamland, but he awoke feeling fully himself. He found Molly McGinnis already at the house, and she took occasion to speak with him privately as soon as possible.

"Did you's have any adventure last night?" she asked.

"Niver the wan!" Dennis replied, falling into his broadest dialect; "that is, not anny as was after bein' fit fer a disciple ave Brian Boroihme. Sure, the toimes have gone out ave joint since great Brian was king ave Ireland. Me mother says so, an' she ought ter know, fer there's niver a rock or tree in Ballyragget she don't know an' be on speakin' terms with. Mary, I'm obliged ter say all was serene last night."

"I've done some detective work!"

"You hev? Go away!"

"I mean it. I tried to find you, last night, to tell ye about it, but I couldn't see you nowhere. To-day is goin' ter settle things between the Brown Sport an' the Ellistons."

"It is?"

"So I heard Montague say. I spied on him an' Van Decker, an' got paid fer my trouble."

"W'ot's up?"

"The Brown Sport said Tom Tracer was pipin' him, an' must be in Robert Elliston's employ, an' the fact that Robert was makin' such a fight showed that he was gittin' dangerous. So the Brown Sport told Van Decker they would call on Robert an' his sister this forenoon, an' two things must be done before night: Robert must buy out Van Decker's share in the Eldorado Oil Company, an' Irene Elliston must marry the Brown Sport."

"Wal, b'jinks! that jigger has got gall that 'll weigh twenty-one ounces ter the pound!" Dennis exclaimed.

"Oh! they say Robert an' Irene dassent refuse, for ef the whole truth was out it would ruin the Ellistons, in a money way, an' that would kill feeble old Colonel Elliston. Robert an' Irene would part with all their money before yielding an inch, but they can't bear to see their old father suffer."

"An' matters are goin' ter be pushed to a crisis, right off, kerslap?"

"Yes."

"Mary Katherine, I think I have business with Thomas J. Tracer, immediate. Farewell, Miss McGinnis!"

Dennis hastened down the street, and had soon poured the story into the detective's ears.

"We've got ter go right to the rescue!" he added.

"What can we do? Montague and Van Decker are bound to bleed the Ellistons by means of the worthless oil-plant, and the brother and sister evidently object to having them arrested for blackmail, as that would make all public, and bring it to old Colonel Elliston's ears. I don't know how to help them."

"Can't somebody else buy the kerosene pond?"

"You forget that it is worthless."

"I ain't so sure o' that. It suddintly comes back ter me that I heard some o' the thimble-riggers say—I don't jest remember who—that old Van Decker's oil farm was valuable, and he refused a good sum for it out there."

Dennis paused, meditated, and then his face suddenly grew eager and he exclaimed:

"Say, mister, w'ot ef Van Decker is playin' a deep game?"

"You have an idea. What is it?"

"What's all this commotion over the Eldorado oil barrel fer, anyhow! Of course Roland G. Montague's game is plain, but mebbe there's more to it. What ef that oil biz has suddenly panned out rich?"

Tracer started, and then slowly replied:

"While this hardly seems likely, your idea is worth thinking about. Young Elliston ought to have advices right from headquarters in Oil Gutter."

"But the Brown Sport won't give him time."

"He must, and shall. He has had a clear road thus far, but it is time for some one to block

him. I will see Robert and his sister, at once. I don't know as they will allow me to act in their behalf, but I feel sure I can help them out. The Brown Sport and Van Decker must be arrested on the charge of attempting my life. I don't suppose the Pennsylvanian had any hand in it, but it will do no harm to infer that he did. With these men locked up, and kept away from reporters, they can't spread the story of the Elliston financial weakness."

"An' there'll be time ter see ef the oil dairy has got down ter biz."

"Yes."

"Do it, mister; do it!"

Dennis spoke with excitement, and Tracer rose.

"Ill go to the banker's house, at once."

"May I go 'long, too?"

"If you wish."

"I'm wid you!" Dennis cried, gleefully.

CHAPTER XVI.

DENNIS SERVES TWO MASTERS.

Two hours later, when a train left Jersey City on the Pennsylvania Railroad, there was among the passengers a gray-bearded man of impressive appearance.

This gentleman had a history as a business man. He had made a large fortune in oil, thanks to the product of William Penn's once silvan land. Many years' experience in that line had made him an expert.

Now he had retired from business.

He had purchased a short-distance ticket before starting; a ticket which took him only to the first stop of any importance. At the latter station he alighted and hurried to the office.

"Ticket for Oil Gutter, Penn.!" he directed.

It was given him, and he returned to his old seat in the train.

If this traveler was off on such a journey, why did he take such a peculiar way of buying his ticket? Was there any reason why this expert in oil did not want his destination known? Did he fear that, if he purchased his ticket at New York, or Jersey City, the fact might by some chance become known and do harm?

Important must be the errand of a man who would take such extreme caution.

While the oil-expert was being whirled along in his car, Mr. Roland G. Montague walked up the steps of a Madison avenue house. On the door-plate was the name, fancifully inscribed, of Carlisle Elliston.

The Brown Sport was about to ring when the door was opened by the uniformed black boy.

"I wish to see Robert Elliston," the caller explained.

"I am sorry, sir, but he is not able to receive any one."

"Not able?"

"No, sir. Perhaps you have not heard of the accident?"

"What accident?"

"While riding, this morning, Mr. and Miss Elliston were thrown from their carriage, and both were severely injured."

Montague grew suspicious.

"How did that happen?"

"The horse was frightened, turned suddenly, and threw both out, sir."

"But I will not irritate them—"

"Miss Elliston is in a state of coma, sir—I think that is what the doctor called it—and Mr. Robert is suffering severely from sprains and bruises."

"A trick," thought the cunning adventurer; "they expect to beat me off by a dodge as thin as boarding-house soup." Then he said aloud: "I should be happy to console Robert. Pray tell him I am here."

"There comes the doctor, sir; I will ask him."

A professional-looking man descended the stairs.

"This gentleman, sir, has called to see Mr. Elliston," the servant explained. "Would you advise that he go up?"

"Sorry, sir," the physician returned, addressing his reply to Montague, "but it is quite out of the question. Mr. Elliston is suffering from sprains and shock, and it would be hazardous for him to receive callers. I am going away for half an hour, and shall return with a second physician, and remain here until my patients are better. While I should be glad to accommodate Mr. Elliston's friend, I must decidedly refuse to let him see any caller."

The Brown Sport knew there was no such thing as appealing from that verdict, and he accepted the situation with outward composure, but was far from being convinced.

"I don't believe there has been any accident," he thought, as he left the house.

A patrolman was advancing with slow and stately steps, and when the physician was out of the way, Roland accosted him.

"What do you know about the accident to the Ellis ons, officer?" he asked, courteously.

"Bad!" was the reply. "I helped them into the house."

"Ah! did you? Do you consider their injuries severe?"

"Very. Miss Elliston had to be carried, and her brother was but little better off."

"Did they get bruised?"

"Yes, badly."

The officer twirled his club and looked wise. Really, he knew nothing about any bruises, but he was rather proud of having been of service to wealthy people, and was inclined to make his case strong.

Montague gave it up and walked away thoughtfully. He was not wholly satisfied, but all this evidence was not to be defied. He went down-town and to Vandervere Van Decker's room.

"What! is it settled, so soon?" the Pennsylvanian asked.

"No; it's not settled, and that's not the worst of it. Fate, or deep design, has played a trick against us that makes our cards look doubtful."

Montague then told of the latest developments.

Van Decker was not a man of nerve, and it was lucky for his steadfastness that he did not share the Brown Sport's suspicions. He was not deep enough, himself, to believe that any artifice so cunning could be played.

"It'll all be right," he averred. "All we have ter do is ter wait a bit, anyhow. Even if they was shammin', they can't keep it up no great length o' time. We're bound ter win."

"What if Tom Tracer is after us?"

"Say, that chap makes my blood cold!" Van Decker confessed. "He's got an eye like an eagle; we ain't got no such men at Oil Gutter as him."

"He is about the city, as usual, to-day, and Water Bill has not come to make a report."

"Probably he ain't got a whack at the constable—at the detective, I mean, yit."

"If I knew where he lived I'd go there. It is somewhere in Jersey City, but I don't know where. I always thought Water Bill was a man of his word, but he don't seem to be."

"I guess it's all right."

"Guesses don't count. Tom Tracer troubles me. However, I have a scheme to get points on him, and if the device works well, I may yet know whether he is in our way or not. Ah! here comes somebody!"

There had been a knock at the door, and when he bade the applicant enter, Dennis Duff appeared.

"So it's you," greeted Montague. "You are prompt."

"I got your word from the messenger, an' jest put myself inter my hat an' trundled over here," Dennis returned, with all the coolness possible.

"Boy, you have served me well in the past, but I never have tested the extent of your ingenuity. How sharp are you, anyhow?"

"Sure, all the Ballyragget stock are sharp as a needle's point!"

"Can you act a part you don't feel?"

"Eh?"

"Can you pretend to be friendly with a man when you are not?"

"Guess I could, at a pinch."

"And detective work—could you do that?"

"I might try, boss."

"Well, see here! Chance introduced you to Tom Tracer when he raided Purgatory Coop. Are you still in his good graces?"

"He ain't said otherwise."

"Good! I am afraid of that man—I confess it—and I want to know right away if he is really dangerous. He raided the thimble-riggers, and must be piping that gang. Now, by making some talk about them, and hinting at new things to be discovered, can't you keep near Tracer, give an idea you are shrewd and useful, and see what you can worm out of him? He knows you have served me, I think. You and I will pretend to have quarreled; you will be bitter against me, and wish to get revenge. See? Then he will be likely to show his hand, if he means mischief against me."

Dennis declared that the plan was good, and worth trying. He expressed a wish to give Montague "a boost," and said he thought he could get into Tracer's good graces, if that man was not too opinionated to accept such help.

All this was regarded as indicating wisdom on the boy's part, and he was directed to make the venture. The Brown Sport gave him numerous

directions and cautions, and then told him to go and look for Tom Tracer.

Dennis obeyed. When he reached the lower hall, he saw a letter on the table, and, as a casual glance showed it was addressed to Van Decker, he paused and looked closely at the return-address in the corner.

Some idea seemed to enter his mind, for he nodded several times in succession. Then he went out and rejoined Tracer at once. His story was told in a short time, and he was so amused over the fact that he was expected to humbug the detective, that it lost nothing in the telling.

Then he spoke of the letter in the hall.

"That letter was from Oil Gutter, Penn.," he explained, "an' writ by P. P. Lang, attorney-at-law. Now, wo't is Vandevere Van D. gettin' letters from a lawyer, there, fer, ef the Eldorado kerosene-lamp is dead bu'sted?"

"I catch your idea, Dennis. I'm glad we sent the expert to the land of William Penn."

"But, can't we git a hip-lock on Van Van, right here?"

"How?"

"I've got a plan. Mrs. Biddy Mulcahey, she's a-doin' Van's washin' now; an' this is the day fer it ter be carried home. Why can't we decoy Van away, an' then let Molly McGinnis carry the wash? Molly kin read writin' faster than Salvator kin run, an' she could about size up Van's epistle in a brace o' shakes."

"But the letter is in the hall."

"Give the kerosene-man time ter read it, an' then decoy him away. There's only two stumblin'-blocks in the way: Van may keep it in his pocket, an' Molly may not git inter his room; but it ought ter be tried. Is it a go?"

Three hours later Dennis and the detective were in the same room, when Molly walked calmly into their presence.

"What luck?" Dennis asked, eagerly.

"Sure, you don't expect a descendant of the McGinnises o' Ballyragget to get left, do you's?" she airily returned. "It's meself has done all you told me. I've delivered the wash in Mr. Oil Gutter's room, an' I've read the letter."

"What does it say?"

"First, I don't believe Van owns one-tenth part ave the kerosene farm, but he's advised to buy! Sure, the lawyer told him the well was sure to flow big, an' advised him to try an' buy Elliston out, no matter at what cost."

"Glory, Bridget Jane!" Dennis cried. "The hen is on!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ENGAGEMENT WELL KEPT.

THE Brown Sport could hardly curb his impatience during the twenty-four hours that followed, but his apprehensions were allayed somewhat by a report from Dennis that he had succeeded in talking with Tom Tracer; that the latter had asked many questions about Van Decker, Cal Garland and Jake Dowling, but had referred to Montague only casually, and then only as a possible ally of Van Decker and the thimble-riggers in some vague scheme.

All this seemed to show that the detective was far wide of the mark, and the Brown Sport felt easier in mind, but he was too world-wise to believe indications implicitly.

Anxious to win the Elliston game before news of any kind should go forth from Oil Gutter, he wrote to Robert urging an interview the next day, and received a reply before night.

It was to the effect that, though far from well, he would see Montague and Van Decker that evening, at his home.

"We may decide to concede a point, if you will do the same," Robert added, and the schemers built fresh hopes on the sentence.

The appointment was kept.

They found Robert in his private room, bolstered up in an easy-chair with pillows, and looking pale and languid. For a moment fresh doubts came to Montague. Why should a strong young man be so upset, even if he had been in an accident? The Brown Sport had seen men smile and look bright when suffering from broken legs and a lacerated head. But business made him forget his doubts.

Van Decker paused to condole with the invalid in his usual clumsy way, but they soon came to business.

"I wish to request a new line of settlement," observed Robert, wearily.

"What?"

"If I forfeit my share in the Eldorado Oil Company, utterly, will you consent to let me drop out, and bond yourselves never to advertise the concern with my name attached, or use my name in any way?"

Van Deckers' eyes glistened. He thought he saw a glorious chance, and would have jumped at it greedily, but Roland was the leader, and, as he well knew, had further plans.

"All this has been discussed before," the Brown Sport returned, impatiently.

"But, surely, you can ask no more than that I forfeit the money I put in the Eldorado."

"I do want more. I want Irene for my wife."

"She objects."

"Oh! very well; if she prefers that Colonel Elliston should hear the whole story, just let him be called in."

"My father is visiting a friend, this evening. But state your position, sir."

"All this is old talk. Why harp on chest-nuts? But, in my plain words, I demand Irene's hand in marriage, and a good slice of money."

For the latter, being modest, and inclined to come down a peg, I'll take a nominal sum—namely, your share in the oil-plant."

"And if I refuse you will tell to Colonel Elliston and the world news that will break my father's heart?"

"That's the plain English of it."

"But it is blackmail."

"Call it what you will; that's the demand."

"We're right modest, too," added Van Decker.

"I've sunk all my money in that darned old oil racket at my town, an' I'm bu'sted all ter smash. You can't expect a man ter go ter the poor-house when he sees a chance ter fill up his wallet, can you?"

"Mr. Van Decker, what will you take for your share in the oil-plant, and sell outright?"

"A hundred thousan' dollars."

"Yet, it is worthless?"

"Fer oil, it is; but ter bleed you, I guess it's about as smart a piece o' property as I need."

"My dear sir, you are hardly ingenuous. You twist and turn laboriously. I have a better opinion of the Eldorado than you have. In days past, when it was declared worthless, I paid men to look it over and see if there was any good in it. You were my agent; you said experts really did make examination; unfavorable reports came to me from men said to be these experts. Lately, I have sent from this city a man I know to be an expert, and honest, and I have his report."

The plotters began to look startled.

"He states that the Eldorado is a very promising piece of property; that recent ventures there have demonstrated that it is capable of a rich flow; that he will stake his reputation I can, today, sell my shares for double what I paid for them, but advises me to hold on to them. In brief, I have been deceived and lied to by you, sir!"

Elliston no longer appeared like a sick man. He had started up from the pillows; his head was held erect, and his eyes were bright and ominous.

Van Decker's lower jaw fell. He was dismayed and speechless.

"But," interposed the Brown Sport, hastily, "your quarrel with Van don't apply to me. As I said, I want Irene for my wife, or your father—"

"Mr. Montague, I have to-day negotiated a loan whereby the house of Elliston & Iber is made firm as a rock. The money I withdrew to speculate in oil is made good, and no trace of any indiscretion on my part remains. Were the matter to be investigated, now, you could not prove what you allege—"

"I believe this is a bluff!" Montague cried, hotly.

"You shall see!"

Robert waved his hand, and from behind the drapery at the end of the room came three persons, at sight of whom the conspirators lost color.

One was a stranger; the others were Tom Tracer and Dennis Duff.

"These men," Robert added, "are witnesses to the fact that you tried to blackmail me."

"Yes, an' a heap more!" added Dennis. "If you had a stylographic pen you couldn't begin ter tell the whole story, mister. We're on ter them with number seven feet!"

Neither of the plotters had anything to say at first, for they were overwhelmed, but it needed no words for the Brown Sport to see that he had been outgeneraled. Dennis would not be there unless he was arrayed with the opposition, and his former employer was shrewd enough to realize that the movement against him had been in force more than one day.

"How is it, gentlemen," asked Tom Tracer, quietly, "do you want to continue the fight?"

"What have you to do with it?" Montague blustered.

"I represent the law."

"I have not broken it."

"You have tried blackmail. Do you want to keep it up?"

"I shall learn whether Elliston has fortified his position as he says, before I answer."

"And you?" added Tracer, addressing Van Decker.

"I've got enough!" cried the Pennsylvanian, in a fright. "Montague led me inter this, or I wouldn't 'a' done a thing, I wouldn't!"

"Coward!" the Brown Sport muttered.

"What is the Eldorado worth?" continued Tracer.

"A heap o' money. Oil was reelly struck, there, a month ago. It's goin' ter be a big thing."

"How much do you own?"

"One share," Van Decker confessed, sheepishly.

"And there are one hundred and one, all told. You are not a heavy stockholder. Mr. Van Decker, if the law refrains from touching you, will you sign a full confession of your infamous plot?"

"Don't you do it!" Montague ordered.

"But I will! Gosh ter mighty! I ain't goin' ter put my foot inter no trap. All I want is ter get back ter Oil Gutter, an' stay there."

"Thank your lucky stars you have the chance, sir! You could be prosecuted for blackmail, but it is Mr. Elliston's desire to drop that matter, and let you go free, if you act reasonably."

"I will, mister; I will."

"Coward!" again uttered the Brown Sport.

"You, Montague, will not be prosecuted for blackmail—if you are reasonable—not yet for trying to kidnap Miss Elliston, nor yet for setting Water Bill on me; but there is another count against you. For some time I have been working up another case against you, and I now arrest you for forgery. You know the case, though it concerns no one here. You will be prosecuted for that."

The Brown Sport kept his seat with the courage characteristic of him. He knew he was in the toils, and was too proud to make vain resistance, or to indulge in bluster.

"You've played your cards well," he finally muttered, viciously.

"We sent an expert to see the oil-plant, and, to keep you quiet in the meanwhile, gave out the story of the accident to Mr. and Miss Elliston. That was all humbug; they had no accident. But the ruse worked; we gained time."

Montague looked at Dennis.

"Imagine I don't owe this boy any good will," he added.

"I've done my best ter beat you," Dennis confessed, frankly.

"Traitor!"

"Mister, I stood by you, an' believed in you, until you tried ter decoy Miss Irene ter Purgatory Coop—"

"Ha! if I had succeeded a drug would have been given her, and she would soon have been Mrs. Roland Montague!"

"Ef it's traitorous ter go back on sech a mean skunk, I'm glad I did it. Sure, the Duff family never would ag'in hold up their heads in New York, or look back ter the glories o' Ballyragget, ef one o' the stock had gone ter the bad. I prefer ter stand up an' be counted with Tom Tracer & Co., an' I hope I ain't a cipher. There, I've made my speech, an' now I'll fall back ter the rear an' tackle the lunch counter!"

Tom Tracer kept his word, and Montague, after due trial, was sent to Sing Sing for forgery. Water Bill, Cal Garland and Jake Dowling also went to rusticate at the same place. The Brown Sport learned, through his lawyer, that the Ellistons had made their position impregnable, and he decided not to injure himself in order to trouble them. The facts of this chronicle remained untold in public.

Van Decker returned to his home, a badly frightened and repentant man.

Colonel Ellison never knew of the danger his family and business house had been in, and the Eldorado Oil Company has been making money rapidly. Robert has paid off all debts, and Elliston & Iber are on solid financial footing.

Tom Tracer continues in business, and often finds a chance for the heir of the Duffs to help him.

Dennis has great aspirations in the detective line, but Molly McGinnis still has some doubts of his ability to keep out of trouble, and in her efforts to take care of him, she often assists, too, in aiding him to carry out the work set for him by Tom Tracer.

THE END.

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393 Seawall, the Boy Lieutenant.
402 Isodor, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
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437 The Sea Raider.
441 The Ocean Firefly; or, A Middy's Vengeance.
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454 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
462 The Born Guide; or, The Sailor Boy Wanderer.
468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Coaster.
474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
483 Ferrets Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
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511 The Outlawed Middy.
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662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
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- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
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126 Playmate Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
152 Black Bess, Will Wildfire's Racer.
157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dorky.
235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
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252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
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289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
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305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
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379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
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423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
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501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
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627 Tom Bruce of Arkansas; or, The Wolf in the Fold.
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709 The Curbstone Detective; or, Harry Hale's Big Beat.

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369 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
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424 Clibuta John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
467 Disco Dan, the Daisy Dude.
490 Broadway Billy, the Bootblack Bravo.
506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
514 Broadway Billy's Roodle.
524 The Engineer Detective.
536 Broadway Billy's "Diddlekity."
548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
557 Broadway Billy's Death Racket.
571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer.
579 The Chimney Spy; or, Broadway Billy's Surprise-Party.
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605 William O' Broadway; or, The Boy Detective's Big Inning.
615 Fighting Harry, the Chief of Chained Cyclone.
628 Broadway Billy's Dead Act.
640 Barebrek Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
647 Typewriter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
659 Moonlight Morgan, the "Pizenest" Man of Ante Bar.
669 Broadway Billy Abroad.
675 Broadway Billy's Best; or, Beating San Francisco's Finest.
687 Broadway Billy in Clover.
696 Broadway Billy in Texas.
703 Broadway Billy's Brand.
711 Broadway Billy at Santa Fe.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH.

- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
123 Klown Charley, the White Mustang.
139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tomknot's Crusade.
231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowls.
267 The Buckskin Detective.
279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Gochetopa.
302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bully.
316 Old Eclipse, Trump Card of Arizona.
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553 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
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582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
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